

WHEN EVEN THE BEST IS BAD:
THOMAS PYNCHON'S ALTERNATIVES TO THE WASTELAND

An abstract of a Dissertation by

Owana K. McLester-Greenfield

May 1978

Drake University

Advisor: Stuart L. Burns

990

#7154-2

Four of Thomas Pynchon's virtually ignored short stories are crucial to a full appreciation and understanding of his larger works; contained in them, in seminal form, is every theme around which V., The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow revolve. In the most important of his nine short works, Pynchon introduces the gamut of alternatives for human action in the face of a contemporary Wasteland, the nightmare world of chaos, absurdity and corruption which is reality this twentieth century. The human responses presented in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," "Low-lands," "Entropy" and "The Secret Integration" are developed and expanded upon in V. and Lot 49, and throughout the six works, Pynchon advocates active resistance to the negative forces which drive the universe; passivity insures a death-in-life existence and is certainly and irrevocably damning.

In "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" emerges the most extreme of the delineated responses. A savior in the person of Cleanth Siegel effects, through an act of annihilation, a cleansing redemption for a decadent flock and an absolute deliverance from the void. In V., the annihilation motif explodes in dimension, with Lady V., Hugh Godolphin and the Whole Sick Crew illustrating a communal, historical death-drift via an obsession with inanimacy; in Lot 49, several characters prefer suicide to that more subtle extinction.

Dennis Flange of "Low-lands" decides on withdrawal from a failed self born of his tendency to passivity. Retreating into a fantasy submarine world with a fictional image of a former self, he substitutes one death realm for another. In the subsequent novels, Flange is reincarnated in Benny Profane, Fausto Maijstral and the desperate citizens who comprise the Tristero.

Manifesting what will prove to be a lasting preoccupation with the second law of thermodynamics and the field of information theory, "Entropy" introduces Pynchon's fascination with the application of scientific principles to literature. Additionally, in the actions of Callisto and Meatball Mulligan surfaces a polarity of alternatives to twentieth century reality: passive withdrawal into the hothouse of the past and active involvement in the riotous Street of the present.

While Callisto determines upon an absurd lifestyle, as will Sidney Stencil and several characters in the second novel, Mulligan stands as the most heroic of Pynchon's many anti-heroes; his futile struggle is revealed as the best, and most difficult, of possible alternatives to the Wasteland.

The first of the author's paranoid questers is presented in "The Secret Integration," the story of a children's conspiracy formed to undermine a malicious adult plot which thrives in Mingeborough, Massachusetts. The actively rebellious Operation Spartacus embarks upon a quest which, if destined to ultimate failure, allows nonetheless for a measure of achievement and the state of "greenness." The paranoia which enables the Spartacan ringleader, Grover Snodd, to refashion sinister events of his daily life into an adult cabal, allows Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas to reinvent terrifyingly random void worlds through the mental projections of a malevolent V.-plot and a ubiquitous Tristero conspiracy. Mingeborough's small-scale rebellion mushrooms in the novels into the obsessive paranoid quests which, if imbued with dangers and defects, guarantee the survival of Stencil and Oedipa.

Throughout the short stories, V. and The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon endorses active, albeit vain, combat against the negative forces of degradation, dehumanization and death. A brief concluding glance at Gravity's Rainbow discloses the consequence of a universal tendency to non-resistance and voluntary acquiescence to systems of control and destruction. Pynchon's third novel, in many respects a summation of his earlier works, depicts, through such figures as Katje Borgesius, Franz Pökler and Edward Pointsman, an accretion of refusals to act. The death of the world is the price, ultimately, to be paid for passivity.

WHEN EVEN THE BEST IS BAD:
THOMAS PYNCHON'S ALTERNATIVES TO THE WASTELAND

A Dissertation
Presented to
The School of Graduate Studies
Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Arts

by
Owana K. McLester-Greenfield

May 1978

171200

WHEN EVEN THE BEST IS BAD:
THOMAS PYNCHON'S ALTERNATIVES TO THE WASTELAND

by
Owana K. McLester-Greenfield

Approved by Committee:

Shirley L. Brown
Chairman

Norman R. Hane

Theodore A. Stroud

Grace Eckley

David Robinson

David L. Campbell
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| INTRODUCTION | |
| WADING THROUGH THE WASTELAND: GRAPPLING WITH GARBAGE | 1 |
| SAVIORS AND SUICIDES: ANNIHILATION AS THE ANSWER . . | 17 |
| SEAWORLDS, SEWERS AND SECRET SOCIETIES: GOING THROUGH WITHDRAWAL | 86 |
| THE HOTHOUSE AND THE STREET: SUCCUMBING TO THE SECOND LAW | 176 |
| THE POWER OF PARANOIA: CREATING THE COMFORTING QUEST | 303 |
| PAROUSIA: THE PRICE OF PASSIVITY | 393 |
| CONCLUSION | |
| FOR BETTER OR WORSE: WHEN EVEN THE BEST IS BAD . . . | 429 |
| LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED | 433 |

WADING THROUGH THE WASTELAND: GRAPPLING WITH GARBAGE

"Son, . . . someday this will all be yours."

--Philip Castle,
Cat's Cradle--

"There is Thomas Pynchon appearing out of nowhere with a vision so contemporary it makes your nose bleed,"¹ states Bruce Jay Friedman in his Foreward to Black Humor. Pynchon's contemporary vision, which also makes the heart sick and the mind reel, is of a diseased and dying Wasteland world. Whether he is, as has been variously suggested, a black humorist, an affluent terrorist, a psychic novelist, a self-parodist, a novelist of disintegration, a humorous apocalyptic, an absurdist, an anti-novelist, a neo-realist or a grim apocalyptic, Pynchon is possessed of a literary vision which is unrelievedly pessimistic and ultimately tragic; the stylistic labels affixed to his name testify, in part, to the bleakness, the blackness of that vision, which darkens with each successive work.

Pynchon's vision encompasses existence in a century which is maddeningly chaotic, insipid and sterile, crushingly overwhelming and bound up in processes, natural and

¹Bruce Jay Friedman, "Foreward," in Black Humor, ed. Bruce Jay Friedman (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), p. viii.

man-made, which are channeling life ever deathward; the author scrutinizes what Bernard Bergonzi terms our "incredible reality," a reality constantly transcending itself, moving always to new heights of absurdity and horror which stagger even the most extravagantly inventive of imaginations.² That the locus of Pynchon's vision is frequently America is only incidental, for the malaise which is the essence of the twentieth century infects countries and continents; spreading rampantly from its inception at the end of the nineteenth century, it has long surpassed epidemic proportions, culminating at last in the terminal sickness of a world.

Thomas Pynchon is a supreme chronicler of the etiology of the Wasteland contagion, and a concern with causes emerges throughout his works as a recurrence of certain motifs. After the appearance of V., an ambivalent reviewer commented that "Mr. Pynchon writes with enormous skill and virtuosity. It is a pity that his imagination feeds on such nauseous themes."³ The nauseous themes which are his preoccupation are, however, less the product of a sick imagination than of an eye which overlooks nothing and a mind which intuits much. Pynchon's themes are the

²Bernard Bergonzi, "America: The Incredible Reality," in The Situation of the Novel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 86.

³"Pieces of What?," rev. of V., Times Literary Supplement, 11 October 1963, p. 813.

result of what Paul West terms his "transcendent stare" at the quality of life this twentieth century;⁴ their nauseous nature derives from his recognition that there is no quality to life this century. To elucidate his major motifs, the author assembles, atomizes and defines contemporary man as he exists immersed in contemporary reality. He delineates the symptoms of an infected Wasteland by detailing the fate of its victims.

For Pynchon, contemporary man is a product of twentieth century massness and prosperity. His individuality has been eradicated in the emergence of mass cities and societies, bureaucracies and technologies, social organizations and political institutions. He is dwarfed, stripped to insignificance, ground into anonymity. Mass man is a number, an inconsequentiality and a replaceable functionary unit. Overwhelmed and out-powered by the awesome scope of modern industrial and technological energies, his comparatively meager resources atrophy, his own feeble energies dwindle. No longer an established and secure identity, man is alienated and indifferent; he slips into isolation. Mass man begins to drift at random, a passive receptor to more powerful stimuli imposed from outside the self.

With individuality thus extinguished, extremes of personality and behavior are eliminated. A universal

⁴Paul West, "Perpetuating the Obsolete," Commonweal, 87 (17 November 1967), 204.

average is attained, and deviation from absolute conformity is denied. The sophistication of mass media and its pervasive influence insure even the mass production and systematic reception and assimilation of opinions and desires. It becomes incumbent on contemporary man to accommodate himself to the fact of massness and to weave himself into the fabric of normalcy and conformity; only within certain prescribed parameters may he achieve even the smallest degree of distinction. Man becomes, therefore, a consumer, acquiring the accoutrements of acceptability. His ability to consume determines the degree of acceptability or distinction he achieves. His economic potential derives, in turn, from his capacity to produce in accordance with consumer demands. Thereby, man himself is reduced to a commodity, the value of which is commensurate with existing desires. If he is able to accommodate himself to the laws of supply and demand, he is granted normalcy; if not, he is discarded.

Materialism begets meaninglessness, and life in mass-consuming society comes quickly to consist of little more than empty and repetitious acts of buying and selling, initiating what Irving Howe designates as "the hovering sickness of soul, the despairing contentment, the prosperous malaise."⁵ As man consumes, so he is consumed. With

⁵Irving Howe, "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction," in Decline of the New (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 200.

possessions and potential determining human worth, interior values begin to disintegrate. Feelings of responsibility fade; old loyalties and family ties dissolve; traditions become less binding; established social and religious authorities are weakened; ethical and moral standards collapse. James E. Miller, Jr. states that "the grotesque incongruity between the tenuous spiritual plight of modern man and his fat, vacuous, unrippled life has been the source of much wonder and dismay, horror and burlesque in the modern novel."⁶ For Thomas Pynchon, that incongruity is also an obvious manifestation of disease.

Concomitant with the technological and industrial advances which denote progress and a sick prosperity is a deterioration of humanity. In mass industrial societies, as the material and man-made assume ascendancy, the human is devalued. Etienne Cherdlu, a major conspirator in Pynchon's "The Secret Integration," may have the final prophetic word about the coming reign of the non-human; Etienne confides to his friends: "My father says everything's going to be machines when we grow up. He says the only jobs open will be in junkyards for busted machines. The only thing a machine can't do is play jokes. That's

⁶James E. Miller, Jr., "The Quest Absurd: The New American Novel," in Quests Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 8.

all they'll use people for is jokes."⁷

In the interim, contemporary man--passive, isolated and enervated--increasingly identifies with the products of his pride and prosperity and, as Richard Poirer asserts, soon loses himself in the variety and completeness of his own corporate invention.⁸ He becomes, ultimately, an extension of his own technologies, and thus occurs the fusion of man and machine, the decline to inanimacy which Pynchon so vehemently decries. With society object-ified and the distinction between man and inert rapidly losing its perspicuity, humanity becomes supremely exploitable. Love is replaced by mindless sexual activity; from the abandonment of love are born the extremities of sexual perversion and violence.

Having thus discarded operational spiritual, social and moral values and become entrenched in a world which denies the efficacy of humanity and the validity of the self, twentieth century man finds he is suddenly faced with a violent and apparently random universe. Having dispensed with a God who acts as a unifying principle, shaping and directing events according to predetermined divine

⁷ Thomas Pynchon, "The Secret Integration," Saturday Evening Post, 237 (19 December 1964), 42. Hereafter cited as SI.

⁸ Richard Poirer, "A Literature of Law and Order," Partisan Review, 36, No. 2 (1969), 193.

principles and plans, he is thereby bereft of faith in an afterlife which might lend meaning and purpose to earthly life. Man is confronted with a personal existence of brief duration which points nowhere but to an absolute extinction, confronted, as Irving Howe states, with "the hopelessness of a life without anterior intention or terminal value."⁹ Desperate to intuit some measure of meaning and purpose in his life and the universe and to glean a degree of order and design from the facts of existence, he turns to history.

Since God will no longer serve, man looks to history to make sense of his world, to make comprehensible the barrage of catastrophic events which comprise reality this century. He seeks, says James Miller, to make logical and less horrifying the "images out of Buchenwald of bulldozers shoveling the piles of entangled, nude, emaciated bodies, men, women and children, into huge trenches serving as common graves; or out of Hiroshima of the stunned, hurt creatures, blind, half-burned, grotesquely disfigured or maimed."¹⁰ He strives to discover the reasoning inherent in the incredible and casual destruction of human life on enormous scales via bombs atom and hydrogen, concentration camps and extermination centers.

⁹ Irving Howe, "Introduction: The Idea of the Modern," in The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), p. 15.

¹⁰ Quests Surd and Absurd, p. 7.

Further, contemporary man attempts to effect causal relationships between the assassinations of Kennedys and King, the publicly-viewed slaying of Lee Harvey Oswald, the sex murders of Richard Speck or The Zodiac and the ritualistic cult murders of Charles Manson. He tries to determine logical progression from Depression, to McCarthyism, to the Watts riots, through the travesty of Viet Nam, to the upheaval of Watergate. He essays to uncover linkage between the threat of ecological disaster, an appalling crime rate and a startling upswing in alcoholism and drug addiction, a recurrence of worldwide economic crises, a mania for Satanism and witchcraft and the apparently incurable nature of cancer. In short, man turns to history to make sense of a staggering and terrifying agglomeration of violence, destruction and insanity.

He finds, however, that, like God, history will not serve as synthesis, infusing contemporary chaos with coherence and design. History reveals itself as fraudulent, an artificial and man-made effort to impose order upon the random, to cull meaning from the meaningless, to infer cause and effect from a myriad of chance, unrelated events. James Dean Young states that "any historical view is necessarily a simplification, and any simplification a falsification."¹¹ To attempt to recreate the past and to reduce

¹¹James Dean Young, "The Enigma Variations of Thomas Pynchon," Critique, 10, No. 1 (1967), 74-75.

it to comprehension is to fictionalize it, thereby rendering it fraudulent. As Max Schulz comments, history is necessarily discovered to be "ultimately unapprehensible, merely various limited, impercipient moments of consciousness and contact."¹² Without ascertainable shape or design according to established ends, history does not resolve itself into a valid and comprehensive system and cannot serve to explain the facts of existence this century.

Summarily, contemporary man is helplessly adrift in a formless and frightening universe where history is random and irreducible to human comprehension, where old certainties have been proven uncertain if not invalid, where humanity has been phased into obsolescence. His world is a void, its essence defined by absence--an absence of God and religious faith, of individual significance, of communication and love, of meaning, morality and value. This is the Wasteland. Mired in such a nightmare, man is reduced to formulating alternatives for personal survival; he is forced to engage in schemes which will allow him to cope with this crushing reality, which will allow him to rationalize the absurdity and order the chaos as best he can.

The plight of man confronted with the fact of a

¹²Max F. Schulz, "The Politics of Parody; and the Comic Apocalypses of Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Berger, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover," in Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 82.

ubiquitous Wasteland emerges as the overriding concern in the works of Thomas Pynchon. He is preoccupied with the responses available to man in the face of a void which is permanent and inescapable, which offers no "safe" regions and which is absolutely hostile to human life. For Pynchon, a vital, meaningful existence--life itself--becomes a state of mind which is achieved through striving; as Robert Golden states, the author posits that "it is we who endow the world with human qualities and we who either succeed or fail in attaining our humanity."¹³ Life in the Wasteland is achieved or forfeited as a result of action alternatives chosen or denied. And the gamut of alternatives Pynchon believes to be possible today first reveals itself in his short stories.

Although his three novels have received much acclaim and critical attention, Pynchon's short stories have been virtually ignored. The oversight is a literary loss, for, aside from being valuable in themselves as fine fictional pieces, the short stories introduce, with only rare exceptions, every theme upon which Pynchon builds his novels. They elucidate the development of the author and are thus crucial to a full understanding of the later and larger works.

It will be the purpose of this paper, therefore, to

¹³Robert E. Golden, "Mass Man and Modernism: Violence in Pynchon's V.," Critique, 14, No. 2 (1972), 15.

examine the most important of Pynchon's nine short works and to disclose how the alternatives introduced in them are developed and expanded upon in V. and The Crying of Lot 49. Not included in this study are: "The Small Rain," Pynchon's virtually unknown first story, published at Cornell while a student there; "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts," an essay examining the riots in the Los Angeles slums; "The Shrink Flips" and "The World (This One), The Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and The Testament of Pierce Inverarity," both of which are near-verbatim excerpts from The Crying of Lot 49; and "Under the Rose," a brilliant short story, recipient of an O. Henry prize, which was reworked as Chapter Three of V. and the themes of which will be examined as they relate to the story of Sidney Stencil. Although a brief glance at Gravity's Rainbow will be made, the third novel will not be under full consideration here. So consistent are Pynchon's themes throughout that an examination of Gravity's Rainbow, besides being lengthy, would be redundant.

Ironically, Pynchon's first widely-printed short story introduces the most extreme of his delineated alternatives. Framed with a vision of Apocalypse, "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (1959) reveals that death insures an absolute escape from a blighted world. Since the soul-sick inhabitants who meander about in that world lack the illumination and initiative to undertake their own escapes from death-in-life existences, a savior in the person of Cleanth

Siegel appears to effect their deliverance. Although other concerns emerge in this premier work, the theme of annihilation as an answer to the void figures primarily.

As Pynchon continues to write, the actions of one liberating savior explode into a mania for death. Suicides become more and more prevalent, culminating finally and deservedly in the universal suicide of Gravity's Rainbow. In the interim, however, Pynchon discloses that the world is bending its steps surely, if slowly, towards annihilation through a willed passion for inanimacy, a form of actively-manifested death-wish. In The Open Decision, Jerry Bryant states: "Only man gives existence meaning, and he does so through his powers of endurance . . . Above all, man gives existence meaning by choosing to endure."¹⁴

"Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" reveals that, incapable of achieving even a modicum of meaning, some men simply choose not to endure; at this late stage of the Wasteland disease, many of the void's residents discover healing and release only through annihilation, in deliverance via suicides or saviors.

In "Low-lands" (1960) emerges the second of Pynchon's alternatives. Anti-heroic Dennis Flange, suffocating in the

¹⁴Jerry Bryant, "Novels of Ambiguity and Affirmation: The Drama of Consciousness," in The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and Its Intellectual Background (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 267.

sterile and stifling reality of a garbage world and a junk-heap life, voluntarily withdraws from both into an infinitely more pleasant realm of his own making. Substituting by degrees the imaginary for the actual, he retreats finally and forever into a fantasy submarine world with a fictional self and an arbitrarily-constructed companion. Ensconced in a seaworld which reality cannot penetrate, Flange passes his remaining days oblivious to surface-side actuality.

In Pynchon's subsequent works, withdrawal serves as an alternative for those unable or unwilling, for whatever reasons, to endure present reality and to function effectively within its madness and mayhem. Retreats, whether to seaworlds, sewers, selflessness or conspiratorial societies, illustrate a refusal to participate in the surface Wasteland world. Passive withdrawals are, however, of a dangerous nature; existence within them, although seemingly pleasant, is equally if not more sterile and life-denying than existence surface-side.

By means of a dual plot line, "Entropy" (1960) illustrates a polarity of responses to twentieth century reality. Through the character of Callisto, Pynchon presents the choice of the hothouse of the past. A variation on Dennis Flange's refusal to participate in present reality, Callisto's hothouse withdrawal evolves into an absolute denial of reality and an eventual inability to function within it. A retreat to the past such as Callisto undertakes

initiates an atrophy of mental and moral resources which renders him incapable of assuming an effective defensive stance when reality intrudes its presence into his hothouse shelter.

Contrapuntal to Callisto is Meatball Mulligan, perhaps the most heroic of Pynchon's many anti-heroes. Faced with a chaos which is irremediable, Meatball nonetheless strives to bring about an element of short-lived order. Destined to be ultimately defeated in his attempts to induce order in a system which by its very nature creates disorder, Mulligan's active and futile endeavors represent the most positive approach to the void and introduce the alternative which merits the largest measure of Pynchon's approval.

To illuminate the consequences and dangers of each response and to firmly establish the nihilistic vision which will prevail in the subsequent novels, Pynchon utilizes explicitly and extensively the second law of thermodynamics, the concept of entropy, as it applies both to closed systems and to the process of communication. Emerging as a primary literary creditor in "Entropy," in addition to physicists and mathematicians such as Rudolf Clausius, Willard Gibbs and Ludwig Boltzmann, is the American historian, Henry Adams. Of all the short stories, "Entropy," with its heavy reliance on the scientific principles which are to become Pynchon's preoccupation in later works, is the most important.

Although published after the appearance of V.,

"The Secret Integration" (1964) may have been written previous to the novel; of a much lesser quality than V. and the earlier stories, the rambling and sometimes too-loosely constructed "Secret Integration" suffers from some of the same stylistic flaws evidenced in the only partially successful "Low-lands" and has the earmarks of being an earlier, less mature work. Nonetheless, this short story focuses upon the fifth and final of the alternatives possible in the face of the contemporary Wasteland.

Via the children's conspiracy of Mingeborough, Massachusetts, Pynchon introduces the response which will occupy his imagination, which will mushroom in scope in the novels: paranoia as a method of reconstructing and making comprehensible an insane world and the paranoid quest as a means of achieving personal meaning and significance in that reinvented universe.

Paranoia allows for the assumption of malicious--and imaginary--plots which render life totally understandable, if appalling; the quest demands complete involvement and insures as a result a fulfilling sense of direction and vitality. As Morris Dickstein states: "For Pynchon the paranoid imagination is a special way of rebelling or dropping out, but it's also more than that. He compares it to a hallucinogenic drug. For him it rends the veil of life's banal and numbing surfaces, putting him in touch with something more deep and rich, which may also unfortunately

be quite unreal. Above all it makes him more fully alive, with a more intense and absolute self than the official rational culture dares allow."¹⁵ Fraught with dangers because of the extremity of the response, paranoia and the quest prove nonetheless to be the salvation of many of Pynchon's characters.

An analysis of the themes introduced in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," "Low-lands," "Entropy" and "The Secret Integration" and a study of their development in V. and The Crying of Lot 49 will reveal the gamut of responses possible in the face of today's outrageous reality and will disclose the quality of existence each response affords. It will quickly become evident why Thomas Pynchon is considered one of the most despairing of contemporary authors. The possibilities for human action are few; all are unpleasant; the best is destined to ultimate failure; most are fatal.

¹⁵Morris Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," Partisan Review, 43, No. 2 (1976), 209.

SAVIORS AND SUICIDES: ANNIHILATION AS THE ANSWER

"Hold therefore Angelo--
In our remove be thou at full ourself.
Mortality and Mercy in Vienna
Live in thy tongue and heart."

--Shakespeare, Measure for Measure--

Duke Vincentio's charge to Deputy Angelo--to clean up and restore to order a sinful and lawless Vienna--is echoed in the charge Cleanth Siegel, self-appointed and unlikely Messiah of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," takes as his own. Siegel inhabits the twentieth century Wasteland, symbolized in this early story by a microcosmic party of decadents, a symbol which will emerge often in later works; he soon discovers one possible response to that blighted world. In "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," which introduces the Rachel of V. as well as a fascination with T. S. Eliot, Wittgenstein, Jewish/Catholic schlemihls and pigs, the author sets forth a theme which will echo throughout the subsequent novels: that of annihilation as one alternative to the void. Although other often-recurring motifs are to be found here--Joseph Slade points out technology and its relationship to human activity, paranoia as a method of reconstructing a chaotic world and the assumed moral

superiority of primitive over civilized¹--the theme of Apocalypse and death as an answer to the Wasteland figures primarily and will loom large in Pynchon's following works.

At the outset of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," the Benny Profane prefigurer, Cleanth Siegel, recently returned from the Navy to work on an unnamed Washington commission, finds himself as host-by-forfeit to a gathering party upon the mysteriously abrupt departure of the actual host, David Lupescu. With the two being but "slightly flawed mirror images,"² Siegel is immediately established as Lupescu's Doppelgänger and is welcomed as "a sign . . . a sign and a deliverance" (Mortality, 198). Lupescu tells Siegel that he, David, has been a bottled genie "century after century, until Siegel, fisher of souls, pulls the cork" (Mortality, 199). The confused Cleanth, thus early established as savior by this and other allusions to Christ, does not yet realize how fully he will fulfill his new role. That more deliverance is to follow is hinted at in Lupescu's remark: "'Only a matter of time . . . Tonight. Of course. Why. Why not.'" (Mortality, 199).

The fleeing freed genie admonishes Siegel that as the new party host, he will be a trinity: "(a) receiver of

¹Joseph Slade, Thomas Pynchon, Writers for the 70's Series (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974), p. 24.

²Thomas Pynchon, "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," Epoch, 9 (Spring, 1959), 197. Hereafter cited as Mortality.

guests . . . (b) an enemy and (c) an outward manifestation for them, of the divine body and blood" (Mortality, 199). If further allusions solidify Cleanth's redeemer role, Lupescu's parting comment establishes "them" as the natives of the Wasteland jungle. When asked his destination, the departing former host cries: "'The outside . . . out of the jungle'" and abandons the novice with the words "'Mistah Kurtz--he dead'" (Mortality, 199). At this point, an understanding of Pynchon's references to Joseph Conrad is crucial to an interpretation of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna."

Lupescu has said that the inside, the soon-to-be party world, is a jungle, "Mistah Kurtz's" jungle, in which the "merry dance of death . . . goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb;" Conrad describes it as abounding in "streams of death . . . the extremity of an impotent despair."³ A land of "a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart,"⁴ it seethes with an unbreathably vile atmosphere. The nature and the relationship of Congo to party jungle is thus ominously established. When Mistah Kurtz/Siegel suddenly inherits the party jungle, he begins to act as host to the arriving natives.

³Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963), p. 14.

⁴Conrad, p. 33.

Receiving his guests one by one, Cleanth finds that they are decadent; for them, being "a little neurotic . . . is like being a little bit pregnant" (Mortality, 203). Alienated and depraved, they are residents of Washington, D.C., the first of many tourist lands which will appear throughout Pynchon's works, and the author makes it clear that tourist lands are spiritually arid and devoid of true humanity, for their inhabitants live with appearances only and understand no more than surfaces. Siegel wonders "how in the hell it was possible for anyone to sink roots" in a place like Washington "unless it had nothing to do with the place at all and was a question of compulsion" (Mortality, 202). Although uneasy and unwilling to think about it too seriously, he knows that cities scarcely vary, that be it Cambridge, Swampscott, Boston or Washington, the golden rule in any Baedeker land is "Screw the Sergeant before He Screweth Thee," that it is "fun to manoeuvre" and that people thrive on being manipulated (Mortality, 197). If the individual tourists vary, the types are constant (Mortality, 198), and Siegel soon discovers that these party-goers are as empty as their land.

Composed of such members as a young girl whose first words to Siegel comprise a sexual proposition, "a chorus of roaring boys, chanting dirty limericks" (Mortality, 200-01), a woman who has a compulsive habit of picking up men wherever she goes, "Prince players and drunken sailors" and "Goddamn

. . . sex machines" (Mortality, 206), the guests center their attention on backstabbing conversation, booze and loveless sexual entanglements. Devoid of moral values, these natives are truly Kurtz's "brutes."

Conrad writes that in Kurtz's jungle, the inhabitants "were all waiting . . . for something . . . though the only thing that ever came to them was disease . . . They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way."⁵ With his own inhabitants doing a similar thing, it is not long before Cleanth sees in his natives and his jungle "the anatomy of a disease more serious than he had suspected: the badlands of the heart . . . that heightened hysterical edginess of that sort of nightmare it is possible to have where your eyes are open and everything in the scene is familiar, yet where, flickering behind the edge of the closet door, hidden under the chair in the corner is this je ne sais quoi de sinistre which sends you shouting into wakefulness" (Mortality, 205). Before the evening's end, Siegel will realize the extent to which the disease has progressed, the extent to which it has created the terminal soul-sickness of his guests.

In his more realistic moments, the host sees himself as merely another of the natives, thinking it absurd that

⁵Heart of Darkness, pp. 24-25.

"he should ever have regarded himself as any kind of healer" (Mortality, 195-96); he is simply another cog in the meaningless Washington machinery who pops vitamin B pills to ward off frequent hangovers, carries a briefcase of insignificant contents, endures an inconsequential career and follows "an obscure but clearly-marked path through a jungle of distrainments and affidavits and depositions" (Mortality, 195). Yet, prompted by Lupescu's admonition, encouraged by the perceptions of the crowd and in "the first stages of hysteria" (Mortality, 200), he gradually assumes the role of priest capable of giving his flock absolution. Since Lupescu was the only one of the soul-sick crew considered well, and since Siegel appears to be David's double, Cleanth, by slow steps, begins to see himself as the only whole among many fragments.

Seen by the natives as possessing a priest-like quality of compassion, the host is coerced into listening to a series of confessions, Lucy's being the first, and "it was as if she had said, 'Bless me father, for I have sinned'" (Mortality, 203). At this time and in this setting, Siegel becomes receptive to the penitent approaches of the people. As the party progresses, or regresses, the bedroom, the "place for listening to bent souls," begins to look like "some perversely-decorated confessional" (Mortality, 206), and Siegel, finally admitting that he is no longer sure he isn't David Lupescu, becomes "for the moment, a father

confessor" (Mortality, 207). Perceiving that his natives resemble Kurtz's flock, Cleanth Siegel recognizes his own likeness to the Congo agent, for "Kurtz too had been in his way a father confessor" (Mortality, 212).

Soon, however, Cleanth discovers that he can neither civilize nor heal in his priest role; repentance brings his flock neither peace nor salvation, and before long he has "had about enough of confessions" (Mortality, 212). Beginning to hate his savages as his Congo predecessor had hated his, Siegel recognizes the immensity of their void and the futility of what he as priest and they as penitents are doing. For the first time, he comes to a full understanding of Lupescu, of his reason for relinquishing his own priest role, for, like Kurtz, David "was going native" (Mortality, 201). Cleanth suddenly realizes that his parting comment "had been no drunken witticism; but that the man really had, like some Kurtz, been possessed by the heart of a darkness" (Mortality, 212). And Cleanth Siegel, suffocating in that infectious darkness, finds himself faced with his own choice of nightmares.

Siegel perceives that if his choice is to be salvation for these natives and this jungle, more drastic measures must be taken. Another role must be assumed. He, therefore, begins a process which, if necessary, is dangerous "because in the course of things it was very possible to destroy not only yourself but your flock as well" (Mortality, 210). Like

Captain Blicero in Gravity's Rainbow, Siegel begins to see that "every true god must be both organizer and destroyer."⁶ Destruction is necessary to cleanse the jungle, and the self-assigned savior undertakes to accomplish it. He chooses to set into motion an ultimate act of mortality and mercy.

Discarding his role as father-confessor, Siegel dons the garb of savior. He takes upon himself the task of healer, and "for a healer . . . there is no question of balance sheets or legal complexity" (*Mortality*, 196). If in Eliot's barren Waste Land, the Fisher King guards the talisman and has the power to restore health and life to his land, Siegel, linked also to the Fisher King by several symbolic references, realizes in himself a similar potential; he begins to believe that he really does have "the power to work for these parishoners a kind of miracle, to bring them a very tangible salvation. A miracle involving a host, true, but like no holy eucharist" (*Mortality*, 212). Reflecting on childhood memories of his dead sister, Zeit the doctor and his brother-doctor, the novice savior remembers the necessary relationship between real healing and death. True salvation requires death.

In the Congo, the rule had been: "Transgression--punishment--bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only

⁶Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, paperback (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 99. Hereafter cited as GR.

way,"⁷ and in Siegel's jungle, too, the time has come for no restraint. Surveying the bestial humans who comprise his flock, he recognizes that "the horror!" of their incredible degradation can only be atoned for through an extreme act which he alone has the power to bring to pass, and as if it were he working for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, his mind registers: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

To carry out his ritual of redemptive extermination, the new savior makes use of an already-susceptible Ojibwa Indian, Irving Loon. One of Pynchon's many paranoids, Loon suffers from the historically-documented Windigo psychosis, in which the sufferer becomes one with the cannibalistic supernatural force, the Windigo. With the identification complete, the Ojibwa, having lived perpetually on the desperate edge of starvation, sees all living things around him as possible food sources in the form of fat, juicy beavers. Knowing Loon to be in the grips of the psychosis, Siegel decides: "Damn the torpedos . . . Full speed ahead" (Mortality, 211) and whispers the word which will incite the paranoid Ojibwa to violence. Having thereby initiated the act of purification, Cleanth walks out on the Indian, who is loading ammunition into a Browning Automatic rifle.

Savior Siegel abandons the jungle to the cleansing

⁷Conrad, p. 26.

process and gloats with self-satisfaction; realizing that "the miracle was in his hands after all, for real," he vaunts with a "sense of exhilaration . . . knowing it was he who had set it all in motion" (Mortality, 213). He understands that "this kind of penance was as good as any other; it was just unfortunate that Irving Loon would be the only one partaking of any body and blood, divine or otherwise" (Mortality, 213). As he reaches the street, Cleanth hears the screams, the breaking glass and the first shots of the BAR. Whistling, he reassures himself with the thought that "there was really only one course to take" (Mortality, 213). Redeemer/savior Cleanth Siegel finds his choice of nightmares and decides for his flock that the only chance for healing, for real absolution, for them and for their Wasteland lies in annihilation. It is an alternative to which Pynchon will return many times in his subsequent works.

By the time V. is published, however, Pynchon believes that the demand for saviors has lessened somewhat, for man has assumed the task of annihilation en masse. R. W. B. Lewis writes that the author's brilliant V. is "a novel quite literally about history and possibly about the termination of human history."⁸ That history reveals a

⁸R. W. B. Lewis, "Days of Wrath and Laughter," in Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 228.

universal drift towards death, and the end of it approaches as man becomes more than decadent and less than human.

Knowingly or subconsciously, says Pynchon in 1963, contemporary man strives for his own annihilation.

II

V., which Bernard Bergonzi describes as "a monument to the possibilities of dehumanisation,"⁹ is in many respects a novel about mass annihilation; although saviors appear at intervals throughout its pages, the desire for death is self-assumed and has attained vast proportions. In 1959, when "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" was published, Pynchon envisioned a sick and blighted world which had crowned decadence king; Cleanth Siegel donned a redeemer role and liberated his flock from that decadence. By 1963, the world had surpassed decadence, and V. reveals that man is without need of saviors, the drive for death being communal and the task of annihilation self-imposed. It is, in fact, the common obsession with death and destruction which has largely brought into being the irreversibly-diseased Wasteland. Although V. is peopled with those who opt for immediate release from a void world via suicide or saviors, mankind as a whole is bent on achieving annihilation; modern history, Pynchon reveals, has been nothing less than an exercise in slow dying. As he makes clear, and as Raymond Olderman has so aptly commented,¹⁰ that path to

⁹The Situation of the Novel, p. 96.

¹⁰Raymond M. Olderman, "The Illusion and the Possibility of Conspiracy," in Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen Sixties (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 133.

self-destruction, is comprised of three stages: decadence, a rejection of humanity; decline to the inanimate, which manifests itself as a dead-alive state of near-inertness; and annihilation, the final achievement of death.

According to Pynchon, man falls victim to decadence when he no longer strives to retain his essentially human nature, when he loses a valuable sense of self and disregards the worth and dignity of other human beings and when he willingly submits to the corruption and decay which characterize this century. In V., play director Itague explains: "A decadence . . . is a falling-away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories."¹¹ The growing non-humanity which decadence denotes reveals itself in two major ways: the inversion of love and the perversion of sexuality and the continuation and progressive growth of war. In both instances, love is subsumed by indifference or hatred, and humanity is viewed as an object, something to be exploited, discarded or destroyed.

Having succumbed to decadence, man then slips by degrees into inanimacy. Denying the saving potential of love and human caring and treating everything in his world

¹¹Thomas Pynchon, V. (1963; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1964), p. 380. All subsequent references to V. will be to the reprinted paperback edition.

as an object, he begins to assume unto himself the inertness which surrounds him. In V., especially in the episodes relating to our more recent history, mankind has already fallen from decadence; V. is, in many ways, an exposé on contemporary inanimacy. Irving Feldman states: "The subject of the novel is nothing less than the 20th Century and its essential spirit, which is identified, every 20 pages or so, as the Inanimate."¹² Once decadent, inanimacy is the next step along the road to annihilation, and, says Robert Golden, "in the logic of V. everything comes to rest in the inanimate void which Pynchon projects as the end of history and which always awaits us just outside our human sphere."¹³

By seeking or allowing himself to become inanimate, by desiring to achieve an inert state, man seeks his own annihilation; Charles Harris states that the "Freudian death wish may be seen as a subconscious desire to return to the inorganic state from which man arose."¹⁴ By reducing himself and his world to "thing-ness," man approaches a deathly state of nothingness. A mass desire for death is nearly fulfilled in V., for, knowingly or subconsciously, the inhabitants of

¹²Irving Feldman, "Keeping Cool," Commentary, 36 (September, 1963), 259.

¹³"Mass Man and Modernism," p. 14.

¹⁴Charles B. Harris, "Death and Absurdity: Thomas Pynchon and the Entropic Vision," in Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd (New Haven: College and University Press, 1971), p. 87.

the twentieth century have retrogressed steadily down the route to extinction. This first novel reveals on a universal scale the modern tendency to what Stephen Koch describes as "the diminution, contraction, and final extinction of the impulses for life in the spirit that no longer seeks its natural values."¹⁵

If the history of mankind in this century reveals the drift towards self-destruction, that death-drift is encapsulated in the career of Lady V.. A destructive and dying force, V.'s purpose is to establish "a colony of the Kingdom of Death" (V., 386), and her decadence and motivating obsession with the inanimate point up the end which awaits us all. In this first novel, annihilation wears the face of V..

In all of her manifestations and disguises, V. is allied with death and destruction. She is associated with conspiracies, riots and war and is always on hand to encourage the havoc. V. is rumored to have served as the lucky mascot for the Mahdists at the Siege of Khartoum in 1884 (V., 364), wearing thenceforward an ivory comb in the shape of five crucified soldiers, a memento of the tortures inflicted upon the Mahdi's British prisoners. In Egypt, during the 1898 Fashoda Crisis, she engages in a young and crude Mata Hari routine (V., 362), causing the death of an

¹⁵Stephen Koch, "Imagination in the Abstract," Antioch Review, 24 (Summer, 1964), 257.

old spy. In Florence in 1899, she dabbles in espionage and is enraptured by "the spasms of wounded bodies, the fair of violent death" (V., 192) occasioned by the bloody riots.

V. appears on Malta at the beginning of World War I, becomes intimate with the poet-militant, D'Annunzio, and the soon-to-be-dictator, Mussolini, and remains on the island for the 1919 June Disturbances, an accomplished and incredibly cruel veteran of international intrigue. She is on hand at the occasion of the 1922 Bondel uprising in South-West Africa, in itself a recreation of the 1904 pogrom initiated by the German von Trotha. Most probably, V. lives in Germany during the early years of Hitler, although she is also rumored to be inciting chaos in Spain and Asia. She witnesses the World War II bombing of Malta and, if Herbert Stencil is correct, is present to usher in the debacle of the Atom Bomb and the Cold War. Without political preference and connected with hints of Apocalypse and Armageddon, V.'s etiology is war (V., 362); her habitat is the state of siege (V., 50); her way is absolute upheaval (V., 458).

In addition to her linkage with war, V.'s debasement of sexuality and her perversion of love also associate her with destruction. At age nineteen she is a rationalizing prostitute with a history of four illicit affairs, her support thereafter maintained by a host of men, from a wine merchant in Antibes, to a Polish cavalry lieutenant in

Athens, to an art dealer in Rome (V., 151). The mysterious Lady is a deadly romantic partner; love with and for her brings only destruction. In Paris in 1913, during an outburst of depraved cultural modernism, her lesbian-fetish relationship results in the gory death of the object of her perverted desire. In 1919, she exploits Sidney Stencil's love for her and brings about, if indirectly, the old campaigner's death. At Foppl's Siege and in the guise of Vera Meroving, she is a sado-masochist in the company of the transvestite Lieutenant Weissmann, who has connections with Adolph Hitler; as the teen-aged temptress-nymphomaniac, Hedwig Vogelsang, her "purpose on earth is to tantalize and send raving the race of man" (V., 221). On Malta during the second World War, V. is the totally corrupt transvestite Bad Priest.

But V. denotes something far more appalling than the decadence of perverted sexuality and love and the non-humanity of war and violence. She is "something bigger than simple insurrection, bigger than a single country" (V., 161); she is the something monstrous which has been building throughout history (V., 362), the something which fits in with "The Big One, the century's master cabal" (V., 210). R. W. B. Lewis states: "V. is of course the dark lady of the apocalypse . . . She is Satan himself in the guise of the Whore of Babylon, let loose upon an apostate world to hurry, enlarge, and direct the great catastrophe; and to

embody and symbolize it in her own being, her own very body. . . . Wherever she walks, there are apocalyptic tremors."¹⁶ Concisely, The Ultimate Plot Which Has No Name (V., 210) for which she is the harbinger is the plunge to annihilation brought about by a decline to the inanimate. Her personal history discloses what Lewis terms "the deliberate and systematic reicization of mankind: the transformation of persons not so much into machines as into sheer motionless things."¹⁷

By the first years of the twentieth century, Victoria Wren has become soulless, determined purely by her clothes and accessories (V., 375). Mentally fixed on the year 1913, Herbert Stencil reflects on the then nameless woman: "Victoria was being gradually replaced by V.; something entirely different, for which the young century had as yet no name. We all get involved to an extent in the politics of slow dying, but poor Victoria had become intimate also with the Things in the Back Room" (V., 386). Irving Feldman states that throughout her career, Victoria "has become progressively more reified, political, deracinated, defeminized, 'anti-life,' fetishistic, abstract, nameless, has become, in short, V.,"¹⁸ and the character of

¹⁶Trials of the Word, p. 230.

¹⁷Trials of the Word, p. 232.

¹⁸"Keeping Cool," p. 259.

the Lady of shifting identities symbolizes an undeviating decline into inanimacy.

V.'s symbiotic and destructive relationship with Melanie reveals her reversion and drift towards annihilation, for "the Kingdom of Death is served by fetish-constructions like V.'s, which represent a kind of infiltration" (V., 386). The V.-Melanie fetishism entails an infiltration of the inert, wherein each is exploited as nothing real at all, as purely an object of pleasure and desire (V., 379). Their act of love is a penultimate step, and they anticipate the day when "dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other" (V., 385). As Melanie dies, achieving the desired final state of inertness, V. flees Paris for Malta, all the while bending her steps surely towards becoming "a purely determined organism, an automaton, constructed, only quaintly, of human flesh" (V., 386).

On Malta in 1919, Veronica Manganese is (presumably) a thirty-nine-year-old semi-animate with "an obsession with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter" (V., 459). Not content with her clock-iris eye and the star sapphire sewn into her navel, she desires a foot to complement her object-shoes and tells Sidney Stencil: "'I would so like to have an entire foot that way, a foot of amber and gold, with the veins, perhaps, in intaglio instead of bas-relief . . . if a girl could have, oh, a lovely rainbow or wardrobe of different-hued, different-sized and -shaped feet.'" (V.,

459). By the time she returns to the island for World War II, V. has acquired her coveted foot.

In 1922, V. has achieved the status of Henry Adams' Virgin turned diabolical and destructive Dynamo and, as Edward Mendelson says, "embodies the transfer of allegiance from the power that resides in the human and the living to the power of the inanimate machine."¹⁹ In Veronica Manganese, Kurt Mondaugen recognizes the unfathomable energy which denotes mechanical dynamism: "It was her inability to come to rest anywhere inside plausible extremes, her nervous, endless motion, like the countercrepitating of the ball along its roulette spokes, seeking a random compartment but finally making, having made, sense only as precisely the dynamic uncertainty she was" (V., 238). At age thirty-nine, V. is the mechanical inversion of the Virgin, a symbol of the non-human. Robert Golden states that she "represents a new feminine principle, one that finds its apotheosis in violence and in threats of the final holocaust. . . . V. is finally a symbol of pure inanimateness, of the nothingness of death."²⁰

On Malta in World War II, V. apparently reaches the final state of inertness and achieves the death she has pursued. As the transvestite Bad Priest who preaches

¹⁹Edward Mendelson, "Pynchon's Gravity," Yale Review, 62, No. 4 (Summer, 1973), 626.

²⁰"Mass Man and Modernism," p. 11.

nihilism and inanimacy as the ultimately desirable state, she is herself little more than an object. As Fausto Maijstral witnesses her dismemberment and the removal of her artificial foot, star sapphire and false teeth, he speculates that she may be composed entirely of removable parts: "Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs peeled away to reveal some intricate understructure of silver openwork. Perhaps the trunk itself contained other wonders: intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay balloon-lungs, a rococo heart" (V., 322). The onset of another raid, which scatters the murderous children, denies Fausto verification of his speculation.

In 1956, Herbert Stencil, who is and must be convinced that V. survived the incident on Malta, visualizes the seventy-six-year-old woman as she must logically be, as an object composed entirely of intricate and inter-working inert parts, her:

skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be. Solenoid relays would be her ganglia, servo-actuators move her flawless nylon limbs, hydraulic fluid be sent by a platinum heart-pump through butyrate veins and arteries. Perhaps . . . even a complex system of pressure transducers located in a marvelous vagina of polyethylene; the variable arms of their Wheatstone bridges all leading to a single silver cable which fed pleasure-voltages direct to the correct register of the digital machine in her skull. And whenever she smiled

or grinned in ecstasy there would gleam
her crowning feature: Eigenvalue's
precious dentures. (V., 386-87)

Stencil envisions V. as a pure automaton, the inevitable dead point towards which her life has inexorably moved. What he does not see is that her personal history encapsulates and illuminates a universal tendency, for V.'s obsession with death is the same which has motivated mankind, just as her nihilistic desires are those which have directed the events of recent history.

Contained within the characters of V. is the nature of all modern history, for in her the hothouse, the past, and the Street, the riotous present and the dreamscape of the future, are reconciled (V., 459). Raymond Olderman maintains that she represents everything that has happened and could happen in this century, all of which reveals an obsession with death and a predictable future which can end only in annihilation: "Annihilation is the nightmare of the twentieth century, and it is perhaps our Fate . . . The mystery of V. is the mystery of why we pursue our own destruction; it is the mystery of fact in the twentieth century, which points repeatedly to the madness of annihilation--not to the hope of love, but to the waste land after the holocaust."²¹ Robert Golden states that in her various disguises and manifestations, V. presages "the

²¹Beyond the Wasteland, pp. 124-125.

future reign of nothingness which modern man, more than half in love with his own destruction, desires;"²² the vision contained within the novel as a whole is, as R. W. B. Lewis comments, the reicization "of all humanity by its own suicidal efforts--following the lead of its Satanic representative."²³ V.'s progression through decadence and inanimacy discloses on a personal scale the unswerving course of twentieth century man.

Not dissimilar to the career of Lady V. and also representative, in many ways, of the development of modern man is the life of Hugh Godolphin. Traceable in his personal history is a steady and voluntary movement towards his own extinction, and causing those incidents to come to pass is the repressed and, subsequently, actively manifested self-destructive instinct inherent in mankind. From Vheissu to his Southern Expedition, Godolphin unknowingly enacts a suicidal inner drive. By the time of the 1922 Siege at Foppl's, the same instinct has been universally actualized, and the campaign for death has become a fact of existence.

Godolphin's expedition to Vheissu was a result of his involvement at the Siege of Khartoum in 1884. Sent with a squadron to relieve General Gordon, who had been engaged in a campaign against the Mahdist army, he was unprepared for

²²"Mass Man and Modernism," p. 12.

²³Trials of the Word, p. 233.

the carnage he witnessed there. Reviewing the incident for the innocuous-appearing Victoria Wren, he explains: "'I'd seen some beastliness in my Oriental campaigning, but nothing to match that . . . What the Mahdi had done to that city. To General Gordon, to his men. I was having trouble with fever then and no doubt it was seeing all the carrion and the waste on top of that. I wanted to get away, suddenly; it was as if a world of neat hollow squares and snappy countermarching had deteriorated into rout or mindlessness'" (V., 156). When the games of Empire and war suddenly acquired the status of barbaric slaughter and crucifixion, a badly-shaken and demoralized Godolphin sought escape. Seizing the opportunity to escort a crew of civil engineers on a surveying expedition for the British Empire, the sea captain had hoped to leave the reality and memory of Khartoum behind. What he encountered was an even more devastating reality in the form of Vheissu.

Godolphin found the nightmare land buried deep within a vast tundra, beyond dead cities, black rivers and treacherous swamplands, beyond weeks' travel over moraine and mountains of ice. A death region where human sacrifice was still customary and where the natives dwelled in cities built inside volcanoes which erupted to consume them every hundred years, it was a land of "barbarity, insurrection, internecine feud" (V., 155).

But the true horror of Vheissu, the terror which was

to remain with him, Godolphin found in its appearance of constantly-changing colors. He remembers: "'The colors. So many colors. . . . The trees outside the head shaman's house have spider monkeys which are iridescent. They change color in the sunlight. Everything changes. The mountains, the lowlands are never the same color from one hour to the next. No sequence of colors is the same from day to day. As if you lived inside a madman's kaleidoscope. Even your dreams become flooded with colors, with shapes no Occidental ever saw. Not real shapes, not meaningful ones. Simply random, the way clouds change over a Yorkshire landscape'" (V., 155). To Hugh, the country seemed to consist of nothing real or meaningful. With its music, poetry, laws and ceremonies composed of iridescent skin (V., 155), Vheissu appeared to be nothing more than a raiment of random and inconstant colors.

Captain Hugh's 1884 expedition was a horrendous disaster. Of the thirteen who entered Vheissu, only three returned: the second-in-command, who was thereafter rendered "incurable and insensate" and exiled to a rest home (V., 168), a civil engineer, who immediately disappeared from the face of the earth, and Godolphin, who suddenly found himself fury-ridden. More than the feeling of personal guilt over the expedition's death-toll, more than the certain knowledge that he was not meant to leave the mountains alive (V., 167), he was tormented by memories

of Vheissu itself; he tells Victoria: "'I dreamed of it, half the time I lived in it. It wouldn't leave me. Colors, music, fragrances. No matter where I got assigned, I was pursued by memories'" (V., 188). And the memory which most haunted Godolphin was the memory of the glittering skin; the suspicion he could not dismiss was that Vheissu was nothing but skin.

Suddenly bereft of his belief in God and trembling on the brink of insanity, Godolphin undertook subsequent missions so mad that he could only have been seeking his own death. He admits: "'Who am I to know my own motives. But I did foolhardy things. . . . things which did not have to be done. The trek along the Barrier. The try for the Pole in June. June down there is midwinter. It was madness'" (V., 154). Madness or not, Godolphin made, in 1898, a suicidal effort to determine what, if anything, existed beneath the skin of Vheissu. In an insane venture to the Antarctic, he sought deliverance from the tormenting suspicion that he had discovered the truth of life there: that the iridescent colors were its entirety, and the interior was surface and nothing more. If his deliverance had been death, it would have been less terrifying than the understanding forced upon him at the South Pole.

Godolphin felt compelled to reach the Pole, alone and in the middle of winter. It had to be the Pole, for, as he tells Raf Mantissa: "'I had begun to think that

there, at one of the only two motionless places on this gyrating world, I might have peace to solve Vheissu's riddle. . . . I wanted to stand in the dead center of the carousel, if only for a moment; try to catch my bearings'" (V., 189). Perhaps, he thought, at the absolutely still point of the earth, he would find the answer to its exact opposite, the incessantly-changing, rapidly-shifting Vheissu.

Digging through the ice of the most "entirely lifeless and empty place anywhere on earth" (V., 189), the Captain finally discovered the answer to Vheissu's riddle and received confirmation of what lay beneath her skin; he recounts: "'Staring up at me through the ice, perfectly preserved, its fur still rainbow-colored, was the corpse of one of their spider monkeys. It was quite real; not like the vague hints they had given me before. . . . A mockery you see: a mockery of life, planted where everything but Hugh Godolphin was inanimate. With of course the implication . . . The skin which had wrinkled through my nightmares was all there had ever been. Vheissu itself, a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation'" (V., 189-90).

There was nothing under the surface of the Pole; the same nullity was beneath the skin of Vheissu. As Godolphin had suspected, there was no heart, nothing but skin, and that skin of randomly-changing colors, shifting

and fluxing radiance, was, in its meaninglessness and multiplicity, nothing. Max Schulz believes the word "Vheissu" to be a pun on "Wie heisst du?" (What is your name?).²⁴ The name and the essence, Godolphin discovered, is "Nothing."²⁵ Having uncovered the spider monkey, he realized that the "Nothing" he saw was the twentieth century and the sum total of life.

The monkey itself was both a sign of life and a mockery of human existence. Seeming to be animate, it was not; the perfectly-preserved animal gave the appearance of life and was dead, a corpse. So horrifying was the implication for Godolphin--that monkey and man were of the same essence--that he refrained from voicing it aloud. His experience at the Pole compelled him to understand that his obsession with Vheissu was "a dream of annihilation," an obsession with skin, inanimacy, nothing--death. At the Pole, Godolphin was forced to realize his own self-destructive nature, to confront the fact that his fascination with Vheissu embodied an inner desire, a need to destroy.

In his 1898 Antarctic, Hugh Godolphin made a singular nihilistic discovery; he was granted a private vision

²⁴Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties, p. 77.

²⁵Also, and certainly according to Pynchon's intention, Vheissu can be read phonetically as "V. is you," which concretizes the relationship between the fate of Lady V. and the fate of contemporary man.

of the void. Whether the spider monkey was actual or imagined, the understanding gained as a result of its perceived appearance was personal; as the Captain tells his confidant, Raf Mantissa: "'If it were only a hallucination, it was not what I saw or believed I saw that in the end is important. It is what I thought. What truth I came to'" (V., 190). Whether Vheissu existed outside the mind of Hugh Godolphin was similarly unimportant, the personal perception of a skin world and an inner drive being meaningful. If Raf can understand and, finally, share in Hugh's private vision, it is only because, Charles Harris insists, his obsession with Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" is an obsession with inanimacy which reflects his own sublimated death wish;²⁶ it is also "a gaudy dream, a dream of annihilation" (V., 193). Voiceless, her surface flooded with motion and color, she is "no less than Rafael Mantissa's entire love" (V., 194).

So devastating was the Captain's discovery of the nothingness of life and his own repressed potential that he was content to let the Foreign Office suppress his findings about Vheissu--"something so vast and terrifying" that its name should not be spoken aloud (V., 180)--and the British government to publicize his Southern Expedition as a failure. Godolphin refused to allow his personal revelation to be made public, explaining to Raf: "'I had thrown away a sure

²⁶Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd, p. 87.

knighthood, rejected glory for the first time in my career . . . because of what I found waiting for me at the Pole" (V., 189).

His concealment of the horrific discovery arose partly, he guessed, from humanitarian instincts, from a concern for the consequence a public announcement would have. Godolphin wondered: "Did he owe it to them, the lovers of skins, not to tell about Vheissu, not even to let them suspect the suicidal fact that below the glittering integument of every foreign land there is a hard dead-point of truth and that in all cases--even England's--it is the same kind of truth, can be phrased in identical words?" (V., 169). At all times, in all lands, the truth will be: "It was Nothing I saw" (V., 188), and Godolphin, who alone knew the magnitude of control the burden of such a truth demanded, feared that it was too much and too maddening for the human race to endure. Vheissu remained a private annihilistic dream.

By the time Hugh Godolphin appears in 1922 at Foppl's Siege Party, however, "even nihilism, once a private affair of the romantic quester, has become public property."²⁷ His personal quest for death has been made universal and actual, and the events which comprise the interlude between 1898 and 1922 reveal, as Robert Golden states, that "when the private vision of nada of the nineteenth century becomes

²⁷Golden, p. 7.

the public property of the twentieth . . . the entire world is threatened with annihilation."²⁸ The events of the early twentieth century deprive Godolphin of his singular vision; what was once personal has been made communal and commonplace.

Subsequent to Hugh's Antarctic expedition, the world witnessed a war in which slaughter devolved from personal combat to mass destruction. Individuality vanished with the millions of wounded and dead in the trenches, and the once-singular dream of annihilation was appropriated by a world that began to seek death on an unprecedented scale. Godolphin laments an irretrievable loss and explains to Vera Meroving: "'If anything gave me my Vheissu it was the time, the Pole, the service . . . But it's all been taken away . . . It's fashionable to say the War did it. Whatever you choose. But Vheissu is gone and impossible to bring back'" (V., 229); Vheissu was, he continues, "'a luxury, an indulgence. We can no longer afford the likes of Vheissu'" (V., 230).

The war, with the mass carnage of Amiens, Ypres, the Marne, Verdun, Meuse-Argonne and Belleau Wood, eradicated individuality and the possibility of the entirely personal and private. In 1922, Godolphin mourns: "'Everyone has an Antarctic'" (V., 224). When Vera Meroving protests that

²⁸"Mass Man and Modernism," p. 8.

humankind needs Vheissus and questions what will fill the void left by their disappearance, Hugh replies:

"What is already filling it. The real thing. Unfortunately. . . . Whether we like it or not that war destroyed a kind of privacy, perhaps the privacy of dream. Committed us . . . to work out three-o'clock anxieties, excesses of character, political hallucinations on a live mass, a real human population. The discretion, the sense of comedy about the Vheissu affair are with us no more, our Vheissus are no longer our own, or even confined to a circle of friends; they're public property. God only knows how much of it the world will see, or what lengths it will be taken to. It's a pity; and I'm only glad I don't have to live in it too much longer."
(V., 230)

A nineteenth century private dream is twentieth century actuality, and Tony Tanner states: "It is part of the intention of the book to suggest that the world may now be engaged in making actual a mass dream of annihilation, submitting reality to a nihilistic fantasy."²⁹

In 1898, Godolphin wondered what evil had created Vheissu (V., 190). In 1922, he understands that the evil which made the universal void a reality is man's desire for death, which manifests itself in the pursuit of unparalleled decadence and the drive for inanimacy. He realizes, and V. reveals, states Tanner, that "twentieth century man seems to be dedicating himself to the annihilation of all animateness on a quite unprecedented scale, and

²⁹ Tony Tanner, "Caries and Cabals," in City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970 (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 170.

with quite unanticipated inventiveness."³⁰ The evil is within man himself, insists Richard Lehan, in his decadent and deliberate fall from humanity and animacy and in his "giving himself to monster machines and monster systems that guarantee the lifelessness of a Vheissu."³¹ Vheissu was born when humanity became a non-human, actively destructive mass determined to destroy.

If Godolphin believes that the arrival of the universal Antarctic void followed directly upon the heels of the war, Foppl and Lieutenant Weissmann were granted a preview of its reign during the days of von Trotha and the Great Rebellion of 1904-07 in South-West Africa. Incited by the white appropriation of their cattle and livelihood, the black Hereros and Hottentots rebelled against the German administration. General Lothar von Trotha, who had demonstrated during his Chinese and East African campaigns "a certain expertise at suppressing pigmented populations" (V., 227), was sent to Africa to quash the revolt. In August of 1904, the German general issued "Vernichtungs Befehl," Annihilation Orders, and systematic extermination ensued.

By von Trotha's instructions, the Herero population was decreased by 64,870, the Hottentot population by 10,000

³⁰City of Words, p. 158.

³¹Richard Lehan, "Man and His Fictions: Ellison, Pynchon, Heller, and Barth," in A Dangerous Crossing (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 162.

and the Berg-Damaras by 17,000. In one year alone, von Trotha himself was "reckoned to have done away with about 60,000 people. This is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good" (V., 227). If the statistics of the 1904-07 German campaign did not approach those of the 1939-45 genocide, it was an undeniable beginning, with von Trotha its undisputed master.

During the 1922 uprising of the Bondels, Foppl reflects on the days of von Trotha. He remembers the hanging, clubbing and bayoneting of the blacks who could not resist; the "Vernichtungs Befehl" were destined to be accomplished utterly, for few of the Hereros were armed, and fewer possessed operable rifles or ammunition, while the Germans were equipped with Maxim and Krupp guns as well as howitzers. Foppl wistfully recalls incidents of the decimation: the "sleeping and lame burned en masse in their pontoks, babies tossed in the air and caught on bayonets, girls approached with organ at the ready, their eyes filming over in anticipated pleasure or possibly only an anticipated five more minutes of life, only to be shot through the head first and then ravished, after of course being made aware at the last moment that this would happen to them" (V., 245).

Under the sanctions of the general, Foppl was able to unleash his own repressed destructive instincts; his desire for death was allowed to surface and take form, and

for this freedom he was indebted to von Trotha. He explains to Kurt Mondaugen: "'I loved the man . . . He taught us not to fear. It's impossible to describe the sudden release; the comfort, the luxury; when you knew you could safely forget all the rote-lessons you'd had to learn about the value and dignity of human life. . . . Till we've done it, we're taught that it's evil. Having done it, then's the struggle: to admit to yourself that it's not really evil at all. That like forbidden sex it's enjoyable'" (V., 234). Under the orders of Lothar von Trotha, Foppl was allowed to abandon his morality and flee his humanity.

Lieutenant Weissmann, too, remembers the teachings and techniques of the German general with melancholic nostalgia and cherishes the feeling of exhilaration and the spontaneous release from guilt the systematic slaughter afforded, for, as a young trooper during the 1904 uprising, he had learned "simply not to be ashamed. Before you disemboweled or whatever you did with her to be able to take a Herero girl before the eyes of your superior officer, and stay potent. And talk with them before you killed them without the sheep's eye, the shuffling, and prickly-heat of embarrassment" (V., 239). Under the license of warfare, Weissmann was able to give vent to his latent destructive tendencies, to transform his own fascination with death into visible action.

During one very ordinary incident, Weissmann received

a Cleanth Siegel-like illumination which further legitimized his actions during the Rebellion. When a shackled Hottentot presumed to attack a German trooper, he was subdued by the customary castration and clubbing, his remains being left behind for the vultures and flies. But rather than feeling annoyed at the captive and bored at the thought of having to repeat the act of murder incessantly, Weissmann was struck for the first time by a peculiar sense of peace, "an odd sort of peace, perhaps like what the black was feeling as he gave up the ghost" (V., 245). For the lieutenant, "things seemed all at once to fall into a pattern: a great cosmic fluttering in the blank, bright sky" (V., 244), and he understood that he and the Hottentot and every other black he would kill thenceforward comprised a very unique relationship, were two halves which cohered into a whole through the single act of murder.

Weissmann suddenly perceived that between the slayer and victim existed a unique bond which "had only to do with the destroyer and the destroyed and the act which united them" (V., 245). In each individual act of murder, Weissmann was granted the role of savior, and each black was granted deliverance; the death one desired to inflict, the other desired to receive. Inherent in the combination of roles was a "'functional agreement' . . . operational sympathy" (V., 243). Each, in fulfilling the other's personal need, was a necessary counterpart in an intimate and private

gesture. With this revelation, each subsequent act of murder assumed a special significance for Weissmann.

In 1922, he remembers with fondness those moments of intimacy and mutual reward:

Returning from the Waterberg with von Trotha and his staff, they came upon an old woman digging wild onions at the side of the road. A trooper named Konig jumped down off his horse and shot her dead: but before he pulled the trigger he put the muzzle against her forehead and said, "I am going to kill you." She looked up and said, "I thank you." Later, toward dusk, there was one Herero girl, sixteen or seventeen years old, for the platoon; and Firelily's rider was last. After he'd had her he must have hesitated a moment between sidearm and bayonet. She actually smiled then; pointed to both, and began to shift her hips lazily in the dust. He used both. (V., 246).

Firelily's rider understood that for the African blacks, mortality was the mercy of life, and by the time he emerges as Captain Blicero in Gravity's Rainbow, the private annihilistic dreams of an old onion-picker and a young Herero girl have evolved not only into the deliberate attempt of an African people at racial suicide but into the actual, ultimate achievement of a death-obsessed world.

As early as the final days of the 1904 pogrom, Weissmann was given hints of the world to come. When, after three years, he was forced to move to the African coast to become a supervisor in a concentration camp, he discovered that something so unique to the early years of the campaign had been irretrievably lost; like Godolphin, he recognized that the possibility of privacy had vanished. Individuality

had been destroyed in the masses of killings and the subsequent masses of prisoners. So many were the dead, the soon-to-be victims and the indistinguishable black faces in the concentration camp that the meaningful one-to-one relationship which had imbued his earlier actions with satisfaction had been obliterated.

Scanning the camp's prisoners, Weissmann found that he was "forced to look at them as a collection: knowing from statistics that twelve to fifteen of them died per day, but eventually unable to even wonder which twelve to fifteen" (V., 249). The extermination effort had become routinized and efficient, large-scale; the once-private act of annihilation had been depersonalized totally, and the lieutenant sensed that the singular and the private were gone forever: "As a civilian Schachtmeister drawing government pay this was one among many luxuries he'd had to abandon: the luxury of being able to see them as individuals. This extended even to one's concubines; one had several, some purely for housework, others for pleasure, domesticity too having become a massed affair. They were the exclusive possession of no one save the high-ranking officers" (V., 250). Weissmann's experience with a certain concubine brought the fact of the communality of the twentieth century into sharp focus.

Although knowing that concubines could not be exclusive property, the lieutenant wanted Sarah for himself. To

guarantee his solitariness of possession, he hid her and manacled her to his bed, believing that eventually they could bind themselves together in an isolated, two-way relationship, he being her owner, she being his cook, house-cleaner, comforter and companion. But he soon discovered that "on that foggy, sweating, sterile coast there were no owners, nothing owned. Community may have been the only solution possible against such an assertion of the Inanimate" (V., 253). Sarah was eventually discovered by a neighboring pederastic soldier, who ravished her and then offered her to his platoon. When she committed suicide as a result, Weissmann knew that he could not regain "the luxury and abundance that had vanished (he feared) with von Trotha" (V., 251) and was confronted with the fact of an object world he had helped bring into being.

As the lieutenant left the African concentration camp to head inland, he understood fully and finally that non-human massness had become the essence of existence. Death had been made a public affair, and it would thereafter be so:

If a season like the Great Rebellion ever came to him again, he feared, it could never be in that same personal, random array of picaresque acts he was to recall and celebrate in later years at best furious and nostalgic; but rather with a logic that chilled the comfortable perversity of the heart, that substituted capability for character, deliberate scheme for political epiphany (so incomparably African); and for Sarah, the sjambok, the dances of death between Warmbad and Keetmanshoop, the taut haunches of his Firelily, the black corpse

impaled on a thorn tree in a river swollen with sudden rain, for these the dearest canvases in his soul's gallery, it was to substitute the bleak, abstracted and for him rather meaningless hanging on which he now turned his back, but which was to backdrop his retreat until he reached the Other Wall, the engineering design for a world he knew with numb leeriness nothing could now keep from becoming reality. (V., 254)

As sentimental veterans of the Great Rebellion, both Weissmann and Foppl behold the 1922 uprising of a handful of Bondelswaartz with exhilaration and optimism; it is, they believe, their opportunity to retrieve and relive the days of von Trotha, to "recreate the Deutsch-Südwestafrika of nearly twenty years ago, in word and perhaps in deed" (V., 223). But soon into Foppl's Siege Party, they realize that so total and irreversible are the changes since 1904 that it cannot be done.

With "Dies Irae" echoing throughout the sealed-off house, with the unending routine of drunkenness and gluttony, flaunted sexual perversion and transvestitism, indiscriminate sjamboking, hanging and murdering of Bondels, a "soul-depression," a something more than decadence defines each guest. Foppl and his companions are "dehumanized and aloof . . . the last gods on earth" (V., 260). Having slipped from humanity, they approach inanimacy.

The depravity of Foppl's void-world is so absolute that Vera Meroving exclaims to Godolphin with delight: "'This Siege. It's Vheissu. It's finally happened'" (V., 230). But the eighty-year-old Captain knows that this void

is not his Vheissu. His Vheissu was a personal obsession. His Antarctic vision embodied one man's fascination with death; the Siege Party reveals a common seeking. Disconsolate at the public appropriation of his private dream, Godolphin resolves: "'Now I have to go back, it's that simple. I'm beginning to think that if I can get through our siege party I shall be quite ready for anything the Antarctic has for me'" (V., 223-24). Unfortunately, in 1922 the road to Vheissu has been worn away, and return is impossible. Godolphin finally succumbs and taints his private dream with common actuality. He is last seen, having exchanged clothing with V., dancing around a hanging Bondel, sjamboking him as he turns.

Foppl, too, fails of his efforts to bring back the glory of the abattoir of von Trotha. At the outset of the Siege, he attempts to assume his one-time savior role, to force a re-enactment of that unique slayer-victim relationship, telling a soon-to-be-delivered Bondel: "'Like Jesus returning to earth, von Trotha is coming to deliver you. Be joyful; sing hymns of thanks. And until then love me as your parent, because I am von Trotha's arm, and the agent of his will'" (V., 222). The occasion of an aerial bombing of a group of unarmed Bondel men, women and children forces him to recognize, however, that the unity which once infused the act of murder with significance has been shattered.

All of Foppl's guests watch the impersonal,

distanced aerial slaughter silently and breathlessly from the rooftop, for "no one on the roof wanted to miss any sound of death that should reach them" (V., 256). The complete success of the bombing mission inspires nothing more than another in an endless series of riotous celebrations. The special relationship between destroyer and destroyed has been lost, itself destroyed by community and conventionality. Annihilation is routine, common fact and common property.

In 1922, the prospect of annihilation is universal. In attendance at Foppl's void-world are Germans, Dutch, English, Italians, Austrians, Belgians, Russians, French, Spanish and Poles, "all creating the appearance of a tiny European Conclave or League of Nations" (V., 217). Foppl's Siege Party is the world, and Lt. Weissmann is granted the knowledge that "the world is all that the case is" (V., 259). What he sees at Foppl's is what is and will be.

When Weissmann next appears as Blicero in Gravity's Rainbow, his prophetic fears about the irretrievable loss of that "personal, random array of picaresque acts" are fulfilled. Death becomes the ultimate massed affair as the world achieves the annihilation towards which its intensest energies have been directed. Although Blicero manacles Gottfried, binds him in a dog collar and subjects him to every conceivable perversion and humiliation, he cannot retrieve that forever-lost relationship between the

destroyer and the destroyed, cannot truly infect the young boy with his own dying. That special intimacy, that unity, has vanished, for as Gottfried soars in the V-2 over his own parabola of death, Weissmann/Blicero is left behind, within the reign of gravity, to await the Oven and the Destiny he has engineered.

The Great Rebellion and Foppl's Siege Party are only two examples in V. of what Pynchon sees as modern man's death-wish on a large and active scale. Charles Harris comments that, in this first novel, "the implication seems to be that all history is but a frenzied pursuit of a nihilistic dream, that down the ravaged corridors of time man has chased his own destruction, and that with each successive crisis, each increasingly devastating war, man comes one step closer to the apocalypse he seeks. To portray this historical death-drift Pynchon includes in V. a host of crises, riots, and sieges."³² Among those included are the Fashoda and Suez Crises, the Fasching in Munich, the 1899 riot in Florence and the 1919 riot on Malta, references to the Russo-Japanese War, the extermination of African blacks in 1904 and 1922, the Siege of Khartoum and the Christmas Siege of Fiume in 1920, as well as the bombing of Malta in World War II and direct references to Hitler's genocidal campaign against the Jews. Most of this violence is massive

³² Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd,
p. 87.

and impersonal and depicts the twentieth century mass movement towards extinction.

To illustrate the same tendency on a smaller and more recent scale, the author employs the vehicle of the Whole Sick Crew, whose members R. W. B. Lewis describes as "components of a familiar but more than usually repellent world, a world on the far side of apostasy and already doomed and judged."³³ The social and moral corruption and the perversion of love and sex within the Sick Crew, similar to the chaos and depravity at Foppl's, are established characteristics of the twentieth century and are indicative of man's present voluntary tilt towards death. Max Schulz states that the ghost of annihilation haunts the historical chapters and that the words apocalypse and holocaust echo throughout.³⁴ As will be seen, the same ghost haunts the pages of the Profane episodes.

Visible in the Profane chapters of V. is the same menagerie of decadents and death-seekers which roams the historical ones. If distanced by geography and time, if the names and faces have changed, the types are constant, and Herbert Stencil, who traverses both realms, recognizes the similarity and consistency. Contemplating his New York acquaintances, he is reminded of the agglomeration of

³³Trials of the Word, p. 228.

³⁴Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties, p. 78.

degenerates who have come alive in his V.-world:

for here was the Whole Sick Crew, was it not, linked maybe by a spectral chain and rollicking along over some moor or other. Stencil saw here the same leprous pointillism of orris root, weak jaws and bloodshot eyes, tongues and backs of teeth stained purple by this morning's homemade wine, lipstick which it seemed could be peeled off intact, tossed to the earth to join a trail of similar jetsam--the disembodied smiles or pouts which might serve, perhaps, as spoor for the next generation's Crew . . . God. (V., 276)

Stencil concludes that the history of man is not one of improvement but duplication, if not deterioration. He is convinced, like Rafael Mantissa, that "all men were corrupt: history would continue to recapitulate the same patterns" (V., 145), and he considers the Whole Sick Crew proof of his contention, for the lifestyle of the Crew parallels the career of Lady V.. Positing regression to inanimacy as the consuming sickness of the twentieth century, David Richter states: "For the most part, the story of the lady V. tells of the disease's inception and its progressive character, while the Profane chapters tell of the stage which it has reached by 1956, and indicate something of the future."³⁵

The "Nothing" Hugh Godolphin discovered in 1898 flourishes in 1956 because of the Whole Sick Crew. A truly diseased crowd more than a little reminiscent of Cleanth

³⁵David H. Richter, "The Failure of Completeness: Pynchon's V.," in Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 104.

Siegel's lost flock, the Crew members, Irving Feldman comments, are "denizens of the Street, mostly New York in the 1950's, who live out the Inanimate--rootless, frightened, desperate, weary, wantless, or cynical, they carom around at random in the great gaudy pinball machine of the times, ringing up bizarre lights and grotesque scores, colliding and drifting away to turn up again, predictably, in the oddest holes."³⁶ Representative of the human condition, the Whole Sick Crew, whose name, R. W. B. Lewis suggests, is adapted from the "sinful crew" Christ was dispatching to Hell in Michael Wigglesworth's poem,³⁷ has, in all areas, nothing to offer.

From Pig Bodine, whose chief goal in life is "to make a career someday of playing male leads in pornographic movies" (V., 201), to Bloody Chiclitz, who prefers to manufacture instruments of war rather than children's toys (V., 211), to racist-authoress, Mafia, who believes blacks, Jews and immigrants suitable only for comic relief or villainy (V., 113), to string-smoking Roony Winsome, who decorates his apartment in Early Homosexual (V., 111), the Sick Crew members are all "products of a decky-dance" (V., 205); with lives comprised of nothing more significant than drunken, orgiastic parties, several dozen versions of Cheese Danishes, indiscriminate sexual couplings and yo-yoing, the Crew

³⁶"Keeping Cool," p. 259.

³⁷Trials of the Word, p. 228.

members are engaged in "the Dance of Death brought up to date" (V., 282) and are at home in the void world they, with their penchant for anything that is life-denying, foster. They are, as Raymond Olderman states, "wastelanders right down to the bar they frequent, where 'Time, gentlemen, please,' echoes from Eliot's waste land."³⁸

Forced to live with surfaces because "there's nothing inside" (V., 347), the Crew-ites must impersonate the identities they lack. With their conversations gleaned from Time magazine, they converse in proper nouns and expound on philosophical theories about which they know nothing, alluding superficially to Sartre, Wittgenstein, de Koonig, Ionesco and Varese, competing among themselves to see whose combination of words will sound most intelligent, for "depending on how you arranged the building blocks at your disposal, you were smart or stupid. Depending on how others reacted, they were In or Out . . . This sort of arranging and rearranging was Decadence" (V., 277). A depleted, lethargic group of misfits, the Sick Crew "does not live, it experiences. It does not create, it talks about people who do" (V., 356). No less tourists than Siegel's party-goers, the Crew-crowd is deracinated; with no real turf of its own, it goes wherever it is heading and belongs wherever it is.

³⁸Beyond the Wasteland, p. 135.

Living as it does with surfaces, the Sick Crew experiences no meaningful relationships. Walking the streets of New York, Esther Harvitz momentarily contemplates the possibilities of mental telepathy; almost immediately she discards the idea: "She preferred not to think about it. There would be power in telepathy, she thought, but much pain" (V., 84). Esther has no desire for true human involvement or the sharing of another's pain. Content to swing on a "long daisy chain of victimizers and victims, screwers and screwees" (V., 38), she, Raoul, Slab, Pig, Fu, Charisma, Mafia, Profane, Rachel, Rooney and the rest are, asserts James Hall, "people trying to make alienation the basis of a hedonistic community. . . . they are beyond the inventive stage of their movement; their permissible choices have been codified and circulated."³⁹ The result of the codification of love is that "it doesn't mean anything" (V., 26).

In "What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?," Josephine Hendin explains several characteristics of this century which the Whole Sick Crew exhibits; one of those relates to the inversion of love. She states: "The degree to which men and women want each other to be ever-ready erotic tools, needing neither tenderness nor love, is one sign of sexual

³⁹James Hall, "The New Pleasures of the Imagination," Virginia Quarterly Review, 46 (Autumn, 1970), 604.

hate."⁴⁰ The Crew fosters this hatred, for, to them, love consists of empty and repetitious sex acts, "screwing five or six times a night, every night, with a great many athletic, half-sadistic wrestling holds thrown in" (V., 113). Living in this community in which surfaces suffice, Esther has lost Esther, has become alienated from herself and others, and it is "this alien feeling which had driven her to bed with so many of the Whole Sick Crew" (V., 90). Similarly, after five years of a sterile marriage founded shakily on sexual intercourse, Rooney and Mafia Winsome are still strangers, remain "whole selves, hardly fusing at all, with no more emotional osmosis than leakage of seed through the solid membranes of contraceptive or diaphragm that were sure to be there protecting them" (V., 113). In the Sick Crew community, where there is a dearth of human emotion and where the activities of daily life are directionless and empty, life itself is at a low premium.

When Esther finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, she is easily persuaded that abortion is her best course of action. To her initial protest that abortion is murder, the very pragmatic Slab responds: "'Child, schmild. A complex protein molecule, is all'" (V., 331). In addition, a round trip to Havana, he maintains, would clearly establish Esther as the yo-yo champion. So convincing are

⁴⁰ Josephine Hendin, "What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?," Harper's, 250 (March, 1975), 83.

Slab's arguments that Esther consents, and a very agreeable Sick Crew spontaneously gathers together, "cheering, warm-hearted, grinning ear to ear, juiced" (V., 333), and donates \$295.00. Touched by the generosity of the group, Esther ascends, appropriately, to the toilet, where she makes a moving acceptance speech.

So far beyond decadence are the Sick Crew members and their cohorts who meander through the private sector of V. that their drive for inanimacy is natural. Rachel Owlglass, with her erotic attachment to her MG, lives in a world composed of nothing but "objects coveted or valued" (V., 18). Sitting in a rock quarry with Benny Profane, she tells him to pretend that neither of them is real, only the quarry and the rocks; when he asks why, Rachel states simply: "'Isn't that the world'" (V., 17). Fergus Mixolydian, whose life is financed by a foundation grant, prides himself on being the laziest man in New York and becomes a true extension of his television set (V., 45), while salad-maker Da Conho has no voice except that of a machine gun with which he mock-strafes his guests (V., 14).

Similarly, plastic-surgeon Schoenmaker, through his obsession with introducing inert substances into the face and elsewhere and his belief that beauty is not inherent but can be bought and sold (V., 36), has aligned himself with the inanimate. He espouses the same stance for his patients, and after Esther receives her new nose

from him--"identical with an ideal of nasal beauty established by movies, advertisements, magazine illustrations. Cultural harmony" (V., 91)--she reflects with pleasure upon her union with inanimacy, confessing: "'It was almost a mystic experience. What religion is it--one of the Eastern ones--where the highest condition we can attain is that of an object--a rock. It was like that; I felt myself drifting down, this delicious loss of Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob'" (V., 93).

As well as any of the Sick Crew members, Benny Profane illustrates man's voluntary progression to the inanimate and the desire for death. Not coincidentally, Profane's favorite bar is the Sailor's Grave and his old ship the Scaffold. Knowing that he has "one foot in the Grave anyway" (V., 2), Benny recognizes in himself an active and deliberate death-wish (V., 15-16) and a fixation with inanimate things. Although sometimes it seems to him that "things never should have come this far" (V., 397), his actions and attitudes have encouraged the supremacy of things. He strives to be an object rather than a human being (V., 123), and he feels at home in a parking lot "surrounded by his inanimate buddies from Detroit" (V., 334). Dreading the recurring nightmares which foretell his approaching disassembly, he simultaneously daydreams about an all-electric woman: "Maybe her name would be Violet. Any problems with her, you could look it up in the

maintenance manual. . . . Remove and replace was all" (V., 361). Benny Profane is an "inanimate schmuck" (V., 199, 360) whose obsession may well be, as Don Hausdorf states, "a masochistic drive towards chaos and perhaps 'extinction'"⁴¹ because he seems determined to destroy any vestiges of life which remain within himself and his world.

Typifying Profane's desire to reduce the world to a dead state are his "zapping" dead all living things around him (V., 22), his attempt to "piss" on the sun in an effort to extinguish it, and his avenging Angel of Death ritual. If the urinating gesture is ludicrous, it is nonetheless an action consistent with his character: "(Inanimate objects could do what they wanted. Not what they wanted because things do not want; only men. But things do what they do, and this is why Profane was pissing at the sun)" (V., 17). Charles Harris believes that Benny possesses an ambivalent desire for annihilation and states: "His 'pissing at the sun' in an attempt to 'put it out for good and all' . . . certainly smacks of nihilism, as does his 'Angel of Death' routine during which he marks 'the doors of tomorrow's victims' not with blood but with contraceptives, obvious symbols of sterility."⁴²

⁴¹Don Hausdorf, "Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 7, No. 3 (Autumn, 1966), 260.

⁴²Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd, p. 86.

Just how nihilistic Profane really is can also be seen when he assumes his job as night watchman at Anthro-research Associates, where, says David Richter, "man has become an object, something which exists to absorb X-rays, gamma rays, and neutrons on the one hand, or death-dealing physical blows on the other."⁴³ At the outset of his job as guardian for the plastic humans, Benny feels "a certain kinship with SHOCK" (V., 265), and SHROUD tells him that he and his fellow manikin are what Profane and everybody else will be in the near future, since the human race hasn't far to go before achieving inertness; both machines and man are without souls, and both only masquerade as humans (V., 274).

Don Hausdorf points out that SHROUD and SHOCK do not speak with quotation marks, which leads him to suggest that "like demons in Hawthorne tales, they 'seem' to speak, and we are left with two possible inferences: the voices are of some external truth, or they are Profane's own subconscious promptings. Profane wonders at one point whether SHROUD was his guilty conscience, while in another chapter, SHOCK proclaims himself as Profane's alter ego--which still leaves the 'truth' open-ended, but suggests that both inferences may be correct."⁴⁴ In either case, the voices designate Benny Profane as inanimate kin, and although he

⁴³Fable's End, p. 119.

⁴⁴"Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," p. 262.

seeks to deny that relationship, as will be seen in the next chapter, he is of their kind nonetheless.

Composed as SHROUD and SHOCK are of inert materials, they represent the condition towards which all humanity is moving. R. W. B. Lewis states that the "human impulse to transmute live flesh into metal or plastic and the scientific urge to construct mechanical men are only the outward signs of the slow deliberate and perhaps inexorable petrification of the human spirit."⁴⁵ If, as SHROUD says, Hitler initiated the movement by turning millions of Jews into pieces of lifeless junk, Benny Profane and his cronies have contributed to the process and encourage its encroachment. So closely do they approximate the purely mechanical that they all approach an apocheir (V., 26). The only possible consequence is annihilation.

The Sick Crew's--and contemporary man's--unresisted drift towards annihilation is brilliantly captured in Slab's painting, "Cheese Danish #35." On this canvas, the cheese Danish occupies only a small portion, positioned in one lower corner and impaled on a metal step of a telephone pole. Prominently displayed on the landscape, which is an empty street, is one tree, perched upon which is a gaudily-colored bird. The bird and the tree represent the Partridge in the Pear Tree, the symbol Slab has chosen to replace the

⁴⁵Trials of the Word, p. 234.

universal symbol of the Cross, a symbol of hope and salvation. The artist explains his work to Esther:

"The beauty is that it works like a machine yet is animate. The partridge eats pears off the tree, and his droppings in turn nourish the tree which grows higher and higher, every day lifting the partridge up and at the same time assuring him a continuous supply of food. It is perpetual motion, except for one thing." He pointed out a gargoyle with sharp fangs near the top of the picture. The point of the largest fang lay on an imaginary line projected parallel to the axis of the tree and drawn through the head of the bird. "It could as well have been a low-flying airplane or a high-tension wire . . . But someday that bird will be impaled on the gargoyle's teeth, just like the poor cheese Danish is already on the phone pole." (V., 263)

When Esther questions why the partridge doesn't fly away from the inevitable impalement, Slab responds: "'He is too stupid. He used to know how to fly once, but he's forgotten'" (V., 263).

Although Slab denies that there is an intended allegorical level to the painting, one such interpretation is obvious. Man, like the partridge, is capable of vitality and humanity; he has the potential for animacy. But he has allowed himself to become the machine, has forgotten and forsaken the human instincts which would allow him to escape the approaching death. Inching towards chaos, he sits idly on his perch, too stupid or too indifferent to avoid his own imminent destruction.

Slab's "Cheese Danish #35" portrays on canvas the very truth Hugh Godolphin had discovered fifty-eight years

earlier standing at the South Pole. Whether actively or subconsciously, man is and has been in pursuit of death. Josephine Hendin states: "Given our destructiveness, our need to kill, to sully life, our mission on earth . . . must be to celebrate the devil. 'Our mission is to promote death.'"⁴⁶ By turning his nihilism outward, man has promoted death so effectively throughout the years that what was once one man's private dream is the twentieth century's actual reward for unceasing and unrivalled effort; Richard Lehan asserts that "if Vheissu is a final nightmare state of human existence, man seems to have cooperated in his own destruction, seems to have created the state of mind that made a Vheissu an ultimate reality."⁴⁷ So painstaking and determined has been the campaign for nothingness and death that reversal of those efforts is now impossible.

In the midst of the 1899 rioting in Florence, Victoria Wren suggests to Evan Godolphin: "'Perhaps the only radiance left is in Vheissu'" (V., 185). To his reply that life seems to go on in a sort of limbo, an inner kingdom between Hell and Purgatory, and that there is no Via del Paradiso anywhere in the Italian city, V. states nonchalantly: "'Perhaps nowhere in the world'" (V., 185). In America in 1956, McClintic Sphere recognizes that the

⁴⁶"What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?," p. 90.

⁴⁷A Dangerous Crossing, p. 162.

"perhaps" has been obliterated, that there is no road to salvation. Sphere laments the incurable condition of his void world and the terminal soul depression against which even love is no longer an effective weapon; his hopes for some sort of healing "wonder drug" have been shattered: "'Now there isn't and never will be. Nobody is going to step down from heaven and square away Rooney and his woman, or Alabama, or South Africa or us and Russia. There's no magic words. Not even I love you is magic enough'" (V., 343). Ours is a bleak and hopeless world.

Raymond Olderman states of contemporary man: "Like old Godolphin, standing alone in the vast waste land at the South Pole, we must eventually strike through the surface spectacle of things and discover the essential truth--that there is 'Nothing.' This is the discovery of the void, the recognition that we live in a meaningless waste land with no hope of a Grail knight to deliver us."⁴⁸ Contemporary man lives in a void world wherein inertness defines existence.

In his search to make nothingness a common possession, man has passed through decadence and succumbed to inanimacy, Evan Godolphin's state of limbo. There are those in V., however, who recognize that such an existence is actually no life at all. No longer convinced that life is

⁴⁸Beyond the Wasteland, p. 138.

the most precious possession they have because they would be dead without it (V., 4), and rather than exist as objects and pieces of junk, they seek escape and the final state of non-being.

As a member of the New York City Alligator Patrol, Benny Profane is perplexed by what seems to be the reptiles' passive surrender to death. As he ambles through the sewers, he encounters some alligators which lumber just slowly enough to be caught, others which simply sit and wait to be shot. It appears to a puzzled Profane that they know something he does not:

in some prehistoric circuit of the alligator brain they knew that as babies they'd been only another consumer-object, along with the wallets and pocketbooks of what might have been parents or kin, and all the junk of the world's Macy's. And the soul's passage down the toilet and into the underworld was only a temporary peace-in-tension, borrowed time till they would have to return to being falsely animated kids' toys. Of course they wouldn't like it. Would want to go back to what they'd been; and the most perfect shape of that was dead--what else? (V., 133)

Although Profane does not understand it, the alligators choose death rather than inanimacy. Unlike the non-humans who meander aimlessly about topside, the alligators enact their reptilian resistance to conversion into "falsely animated" inert objects. Death is an absolute extinction, the most perfect state of non-being, and is preferable to the state of junkness.

Within the Whole Sick Crew, Rooney Winsome finally

realizes that he and his companions are products of a decadence of which he is the self-proclaimed king. Coming to grips with the true nature of the Crew and its lifestyle, he cries: "'Listen friends, . . . there is a word for all our crew and it is sick . . . there is no one of us you can point to and call well'" (V., 337). He maintains: "'Anybody who continues to live in a subculture so demonstrably sick has no right to call himself well. The only well thing to do is what I am going to do now, namely, jump out this window'" (V., 338). When Pig reminds him that life is his most precious possession, a suddenly-enlightened Rooney retorts: "'I have heard that one before' . . . and jumped" (V., 338). Like Cleanth Siegel, Rooney recognizes that immediate annihilation may be the answer to the Wasteland void; although his suicide attempt fails, Winsome realizes that the non-life he endures, his slow-dying, is better terminated.

Tony Tanner has written of V.: "The book itself is 'a dream of annihilation': it is Pynchon's Vheissu."⁴⁹ It is that and more. It is Pynchon's vision of a world which refuses to resist and, in fact, seems to relish the rush towards death. Pynchon has viewed our contemporary existence and found it annihilation-bound. Josephine Hendin states of the author: "Pynchon is the evil genius of our

⁴⁹City of Words, p. 172.

time, the man with the quickest eye for what makes this an age of rapacity and sexual hate. He is the American Goya whose dazzling canvases are lit from hell, whose message is: Death Rules."⁵⁰ Death rules because man has allowed its supremacy. In The Crying of Lot 49, the Wasteland of V. has changed little, but the number of those who refuse to endure the slow dying, who opt for immediate release, has grown. In the second novel, death rules and is gaining.

⁵⁰"What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?," p. 82.

III

Of The Crying of Lot 49 Earl Shorris declares: "It is a terrifying novel. There are few other places in literature where the idea of the void is more certain."⁵¹ In this second, more compact novel, the Wasteland is brought closer to home, narrowed in scope from the world-at-large to America's own California, and inhabiting this area are characters who vary little from those in V. and are easily traceable to Pynchon's first short story. The people who choose or are allowed to remain in surface society live their lives much as Cleanth Siegel's acquaintances do, going through the ritual of meaningless relationships and the motions of an empty existence. Those who opt for or are constrained to accept underground existences endure another arid lifestyle which will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

San Narciso, where much of the novel's action occurs, is intended as a microcosm of America today and is a certain void populated by wasted people. John R. May remarks: "The Crying of Lot 49 presents the whole of modern America neatly packaged in Pierce Inverarity's San Narciso--the madness of its freeways, the artificiality of its architecture, the sheer absurdity of its social groupings, the emptiness of

⁵¹ Earl Shorris, "The Worldly Palimpsest of Thomas Pynchon," Harper's, 246 (June, 1973), 80.

its scholarship. What has been lost is the possibility, perhaps, of viewing the world as anything other than a circuit set in evil."⁵² To Thomas Pynchon, the world is a circuit set in evil, and contributing to that representative circuit is the loss of a sense of self, the loss of a basic humanity, which reveals itself in a growing identification of man with his machines. As Peter Abernethy states, once people forsake the human values which will lend direction to their lives, they must increasingly derive their values from the needs of their machines, thereby becoming merely an echo of their own technology.⁵³

As in V., man's alignment with the inanimate is of considerable importance in The Crying of Lot 49, and the willing penchant for inanimacy can be construed as an arbitrary movement towards death. Mucho Maas, disaffected husband of heroine Oedipa, as a used car salesman, made the haunting discovery that humans' automobiles are no less than "motorized metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like."⁵⁴ So total is the

⁵²John R. May, "Loss of the World in Barth, Pynchon, and Vonnegut: The Varieties of Humorous Apocalypse," in Toward A New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), p. 200.

⁵³Peter L. Abernethy, "Entropy in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," Critique, 14, No. 2 (1972), 21.

⁵⁴Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 4. All subsequent references to The Crying of Lot 49 will be to the reprinted paperback edition, hereafter cited as Crying.

transfer of humanity, the identification of human with non-human, that in trading his car, "each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life" (Crying, 5). This voluntary foisting of an essential humanity onto inert objects has resulted in a prevailing moral climate wherein it is not only possible but natural that "a photographer from Palo Alto . . . thought he was a volleyball" (Crying, 9).

Living on and contributing to that same circuit of evil are others who have lost a sense of values and, thereby, a valid sense of life. Mucho Maas, who, as a car salesman, used sawdust to hush sick transmissions (Crying, 4), subsequently fails as a disk jockey partly because of an unnatural preoccupation with statutory rape; through a retreat into LSD, he loses his identity and finally dissipates totally, becoming at last a bona fide member of NADA.

The paranoid Lawyer Roseman, without the ability to become a successful trial lawyer himself, has spent most of his adult life writing "The Profession v. Perry Mason. A Not-So-Hypothetical Indictment," hoping that he can destroy the envied television lawyer through a literary vendetta. Winner Tremaine has become a prosperous entrepreneur by meeting the current public rage for rifles and swastika armbands; to his great satisfaction, a large ready-to-wear store in Los Angeles anticipates a big run on SS uniforms

when children acquire their back-to-school wardrobes. Further, Lawyer Metzger, co-executor of Pierce Inverarity's estate, freezes himself into a role he played as a child star and runs away with a depraved fifteen-year-old.

As may be expected, although sex is a common pastime, love is non-existent. Husbands and wives are, like Oedipa and Mucho, generally estranged. At Echo Courts, dwelling place of a rock group very aptly titled "The Paranoids," there is a "prevalence of teenage voyeurs, who'd all had copies of . . . passkeys made so they could check in at whim on any bizarre sexual action" (Crying, 30). One of the Paranoids has devoted his life to hanging around playgrounds in order to be available for the first willing eight-year-old he can find (Crying, 110), while another reminisces fondly about "a surfer orgy he had been to the week before, involving a five-gallon can of kidney suet, a small automobile with a sun roof, and a trained seal" (Crying, 24). Nearby San Francisco has become justly famous for its profusion of "members of the third sex, the lavender crowd" (Crying, 81).

Familial affection has also evaporated in the California void. Like Slothrop in Gravity's Rainbow, Metzger is convinced that he has been victimized by the Mother Conspiracy; he tells Oedipa bitterly: "'My mother . . . was really out to kasher me, boy, like a piece of beef on the sink, she wanted me drained and white. . . . You know

what mothers like that turn their male children into'" (Crying, 16). In turn, the victimized children retaliate by driving their parents to insanity, bringing about "a certain harassed style" which is Grace Bortz's and which is recognizable in anyone with kids (Crying, 112). Abounding in The Crying of Lot 49 are soul-sick humans who categorically deny the responsibilities of age, family and self and are unable to affirm even the smallest remnant of genuine emotion or affection.

Thus, existing in a world in which the living and the inert seem to coalesce, where human relationships are distinguished only by the degree of sexual abuse, where life itself is characterized by an absolute absence of significance and may actually be nothing more than a slow "death and the daily, tedious preparations for it" (Crying, 137), many of Pynchon's characters desire the most direct and speediest route to annihilation. Confronted with the nightmare of the twentieth century in the form of San Narciso's half-life, many choose death as a preferable alternative.

As one example of a deliberate death-seeker, Pynchon offers a Yoyodyne executive who finds himself automated out of a job at an early age because, "having been since age 7 rigidly instructed in an eschatology that pointed nowhere but to a presidency and death" (Crying, 83), he can do nothing but sign his name to memos he doesn't understand. Unemployed and abandoned by a faithless wife, the executive immediately

turns his thoughts to suicide and places an advertisement in the Los Angeles Times to find if any persons who had been in a similar predicament could reassure him or offer reasons to refrain from the act. Upon receiving replies, he found that "most of the letters were from suicides who had failed, either through clumsiness or last-minute cowardice. None of them, however, could offer any compelling reasons for staying alive" (Crying, 84). It is only a chance meeting with Tristero, itself a sort of death organization, which prevents the executive from taking his life and prompts him to found a branch of the underground conspiracy.

Faring more successfully than the discarded executive, Randolph Driblette, who may or may not be associated with the Tristero, terminates his directing career by walking off the set of The Courier's Tragedy and into the Pacific Ocean for no readily apparent reason. Oedipa Maas, upon hearing of Driblette's suicide, realizes that at one time she would have at least asked herself why; as newly-initiated resident of the void, she accepts the death with silence.

Similarly, Dr. Hilarious, Oedipa's lunatic and face-making psychiatrist, is unable to find peace or personal satisfaction in spite of his great success with The Bridge, "his pet name for the experiment he was helping the community hospital run on the effects of LSD-25, mescaline, psilocybin, and related drugs on a large sample of suburban

housewives" (Crying, 7). Tormented for years by the recurring memory of his work at Buchenwald, where he experimentally induced insanity in Jewish prisoners, he comes to understand that his attempts at atonement via strict adherence to the tenets of the Jewish Freud will not suffice. Hilarious admits to Oedipa: "'I tried to believe it all. I slept three hours a night trying not to dream, and spent the other 21 at the forcible acquisition of faith. And yet my penance hasn't been enough'" (Crying, 102). Guilt-ridden and believing himself to be pursued by Israelis, the "angels of death," he leaves a pistol within easy reach of Mrs. Maas, and "she knew he had wanted her to get the weapon" (Crying, 102). Death is Hilarious' only escape from an existence which has become intolerable for him.

Finally, and perhaps most aptly symbolizing the death-wish in operation, are Robert Scurvham and his sect of Scurvhamites, a group of devout dualistic Puritans who believed that all good in the world was the work of God, while all evil was the work of "some opposite Principle, something blind, soulless; a brute automatism that led to eternal death" (Crying, 116). Although the original purpose of the Scurvhamite doctrine was to convert non-believers to the positive, life-giving force, the opposite result ensued, for "somehow those few saved Scurvhamites found themselves looking out into the gaudy clockwork of the doomed with a certain sick and fascinated horror, and this was to prove

fatal. One by one the glamorous prospect of annihilation coaxed them over, until there was no one left in the sect, not even Robert Scurvham, who, like a ship's master, had been last to go" (Crying, 116). As Tony Tanner suggests, the negative forces of death are fascinating, almost irresistible,⁵⁵ and the Scurvhamites, enticed by the greater appeal, succumbed.

As any follower of Pynchon knows, the author's name is often mentioned when literary critics run through their lists of contemporary authors categorized as black humorists, and, indeed, he does exhibit some of the stylistic characteristics of such generally recognized black humorists as Heller, Barth, Southern and Hawkes. Clearly evidenced in the works of such writers is an immense frustration with the world as it is. The black humorist, Bruce Janoff states, "welcomes the opportunity to rage blindly, like Lear, at the abysmal pointlessness of the human condition."⁵⁶ Thomas Pynchon adopts as one method of raging that of simply allowing his characters to deny that pointless existence, choosing as a better alternative death itself.

In V., The Crying of Lot 49 and most explicitly the subsequent Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon, like others considered to be black humorists, discloses that a true

⁵⁵City of Words, p. 177.

⁵⁶Bruce Janoff, "Black Humor: Beyond Satire," Ohio Review, 14, No. 1 (1972), 12.

affirmation of life, an act which has become increasingly difficult in view of the contemporary environment, "simply means continuing to live rather than committing suicide, and optimism is nothing more than laughing darkly at a tragically insensitive environment where uncertainty and anxiety have become a way of life."⁵⁷ For many of Pynchon's characters, the Wasteland eradicates the desire for even a minimal affirmation. For others, it initiates the assumption of various kinds of underground withdrawals. But, as "Low-lands" reveals, those retreats are themselves only a lesser form of suicide. Benny Profane and Fausto Maijstral approach precariously close to an absolute extinction. The Tristero is an underworld void; as Morris Dickstein states, it may be a way out of a cartoon-like, absurd Wasteland, but it is not a way out to anything better.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Janoff, p. 19.

⁵⁸"Black Humor and History," p. 207.

SEAWORLDS, SEWERS AND SECRET SOCIETIES:

GOING THROUGH WITHDRAWAL

"How enviable death must be to those
who no longer have reason to live
yet are unable to make themselves die!"

--Irving Howe,
The Idea of the Modern--

"Low-lands" is Pynchon's second and least successful short story. Written when the author was twenty-two, it fails of its deliberate attempt to recreate effectively T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land on a comic level. References to the literary creditor, although obvious in intent, are often unclear and poorly-established; at times, the story seems pieced rather than woven together. "Low-lands" is, however, an amusing work which makes several important introductions. In "sfacim" Dennis Flange,¹ who could be the Baby Face Falange of V., the reader encounters the prototype of "sfacim" Benny Profane (V., 127) and numerous disaffected husbands on the order of Rooney Winsome and Mucho Maas. The intractable and fascinating Pig Bodine emerges for the first time in "Low-lands;" the names Norfolk, Virginia, East Main Street, Winsome, the Immaculate and the

¹Thomas Pynchon, "Low-lands," New World Writing, No. 16 (1960), p. 85. Hereafter cited as LL.

Intrepid will crop up again in V.; the crazy psychiatrist Geronimo Diaz will reappear in the guise of Dr. Hilarious in The Crying of Lot 49; and an interest in Vivaldi will carry through all the novels. In addition to these minor details, "Low-lands" introduces a major theme which will figure prominently in V. and Lot 49; withdrawal as an intended escape from reality, from the Wasteland.

"Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" and those aspects of the novels which develop the motif it set forth reveal a successful, albeit extreme, method of liberating oneself or others from the garbage heap of contemporary life; death insures a complete and irreversible deliverance. "Low-lands" discloses a less extreme form of escape, but that escape is neither promising nor successful, for withdrawal from present reality disallows entrance into a truly better world.

Those who retreat from reality to underworlds--be they fantasy seaworlds, sewers, subways or secret societies--find themselves in regions which are, if more pleasant than the actual world, equally or more sterile and life-denying. Retreat areas prohibit valid existence and render their residents impotent or inert to the point of insensibility at the very least; refugees of the Flange sort, mentally and morally desiccated, lack only the physical dying for extinction. "Low-lands" is the most humorous of Pynchon's short stories, but it is at the same time a dismally bleak picture

of futility, for the author reveals through the character of Dennis Flange, as he will later through Benny Profane, Fausto Maijstral and the Tristero, that the retreats undertaken to avoid an antagonistic and apparently deadly reality entail, in fact, an infiltration of the negative forces and, at times, the very death they were intended to evade. It is a Pynchonism that the Wasteland is inescapable; short of dying, one cannot flee from it, for retreat implies nothing more than the assumption of an existence which closely approximates death. Not until "Entropy" does Pynchon show how one may face the Wasteland and function within it.

In "Low-lands," it is Dennis Flange who finally disengages himself from the waste which encloses him to take up mental residence in an underground fantasy world. Dennis is both bored and disenchanted with his seven-year marriage to his materialistic wife, Cindy; their union has been non-communicative and non-sharing, a fact Flange considers "a fine and lovely irony" since "the Navy had made him a competent communications officer" (LL, 93). Separated physically as well as mentally, Cindy stomps around on the second story of the house, while Dennis remains a safe distance in the rumpus room on the lower level, frequently wondering "what life would be like without a second story and how it was people managed to get along in ranch-style or split-level houses without running amok once a year or

so" (LL, 86).

Resigned to the fact that his wife heartily disapproves of him, his friends and his activities, Dennis is still troubled by what he believes to be the most obvious manifestation of their marital failure--their childlessness after seven years. He attributes the soured relationship between them to Cindy. She is too rational; her way of living is too patterned and too orderly, allowing no room for the unexpected and exciting. Cindy is, Dennis suspects, kin to her favorite artist, Mondrian, whose sharp angles and lines duplicate her own regulated lifestyle; the two are "brother and sister under the skin, both austere and logical" (LL, 91). Having endured Cindy's methodical mode of existence for so many years, Dennis himself has fallen into a rut and has passively lapsed into inertia and ennui.

Accompanying a growing indifference to his wife and marriage and an increasing physical stasis has been Flange's progressively deeper attachment to his house overlooking Long Island Sound, a house which rises "in a big mossy tumulous out of the earth, its color that of one of the shaggier prehistoric beasts" (LL, 86). This dwelling, seemingly organic and alive, is a source of unfailing security and solace, a perfect refuge from his life's disappointments and discordancies. Flange calls the house "his womb with a view," and throughout the dismal years of his life with Cindy, he has "come to feel attached to the

place by an umbilical cord woven of lichen and sedge, furze and gorse" (LL, 87).

For seven years, the lethargic and disinterested Dennis has immured himself further and further in the house, much as "a mole within a burrow" (LL, 87), until he finally assumes a perpetual mental foetal position; the house itself has become a symbol of his mental regression. The present-day Flange has become a master of Molemanship, "which is less a behavior pattern than a state of mind" (LL, 88). The art of Molemanship allows him to remain relatively oblivious to actual occurrences, protected and buffered as an embryo by "the drool and trickle of amniotic fluid" from everyday noises and distractions; in his abode-burrow, "even the secret cadences of one's pulse become mere echoes of the house's heartbeat" (LL, 88).

Although Dennis believes that the house itself provides comfort and security, the sense of buffering he experiences is the reflection of his own developed mental state of passive withdrawal. The human mole encounters the same feeling of coziness regardless of physical surroundings. When he is relegated to the appropriated and decorated police booth in the back yard after each argument with Cindy, he obtains the same feeling, for "it made little difference to his sense of snugness: the booth was womblike as could be" (LL, 91). Both structures are womb symbols and substitutes, and Dennis' attachment to them represents his desire to

return to a previous, untroubled, protected existence. Wylie Sypher recounts that Freud, who figures prominently in "Low-lands," believed that "the tendency of instinct is toward repeating or restating an earlier condition" and that "our instinct is to obliterate the disturbance we call consciousness."² Dennis succumbs to these instincts. By assuming the mental foetal position, he attempts to rid himself of thoughts of his dull and disappointing life. In the wombs of the house and police booth, he experiences a sort of serene embryo existence.

As Flange soon realizes, however, although life in the womb is safe and warm, it is not exciting; it is, in fact, as monotonous and uneventful as his existence with Cindy, and the house is as routine as his marriage. Dennis is himself mentally and physically too sluggish to stage any sort of active rebellion against either. Instead, he chooses to do combat of a passive, imaginative nature, as is appropriate to his character or lack of it. Without expending the least amount of physical energy, Flange engages in a half-rebellion of the mind, his weapons being a crazy psychiatrist and a consuming preoccupation with an adolescent fantasy image of a world and a former self. Through a heavy reliance on one and a withdrawal into the

²Wylie Sypher, "Entropy and Existence," in Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 75.

other, Dennis Flange escapes the disillusioning reality of a failed marriage and a failed self.

Weekly shattering the monotony of Flange's life is his Freudian analyst, "a crazed and boozy wetback" (LL, 87) by the name of Geronimo Diaz. In spite of the facts that "the money spent on these sessions could have bought every automobile, pedigreed dog and woman on the stretch of Park Avenue visible from the doctor's office window" (LL, 87) and that, being himself a true child of Freud, he learns nothing new from Diaz, Dennis has become mentally addicted to the doctor. Geronimo, who floats in "an irresponsible plasma of delusion" (LL, 88), keeps an invaluable Stradivarius in his desk and is convinced that he is Paganini and has sold his soul to the devil, thereby forfeiting all of his musical ability. During his sessions with Flange, the lunatic psychiatrist reads aloud from random number tables or the Ebbinghaus nonsense syllable lists, ignoring everything his patient says.

Diaz's bizarre actions are a delight and source of fascination for Dennis, who cherishes the doctor's insanity, his "wonderful, random sort of madness which conformed to no known model or pattern" (LL, 88). Desperately in need of this weekly glimpse of absurdity, Flange refuses to relinquish his sessions with Diaz, "realizing perhaps that if he were subjected for the rest of his life to nothing but the relentless rationality of that womb and that wife,

he would never make it, and that Geronimo's lunacy was about all he had to keep him going" (LL, 88-89). Dennis relies on the psychiatrist to offset the constant dullness and sameness of his life, just as he escapes the reality of an aging and unexciting self through a childish infatuation with the sea.

For Dennis Flange, the sea represents all of the glamour and adventure so conspicuously lacking in his life, and around it he centers his fondest and most extreme fantasies. As marital happiness has waned, Dennis' preoccupation with the sea has steadily grown, so that now, "whether it crashed, moaned or merely slopped around down there a hundred feet below his bedroom window, the sea was with Flange in his hours of need, which were getting to be more and more frequent; a repetition in miniature of that Pacific whose unimaginable heavings kept his memory at a constant 30° list" (LL, 89-90). A wildly permissive and failing memory has allowed him to transform completely his Navy days during the Korean conflict, when he served on board a destroyer running barrier patrols.

Flange's three-year hitch has undergone a total metamorphosis and romanticization, as has the Dennis who experienced it. Retrospectively reviewing the earlier Dennis, the present Flange visualizes what he believes to have been his younger self: "Fortune's elf child and disinherited darling, young and randy and more a Jolly Jack Tar

than anyone human could conceivably be; thews and chin taut against a sixty-knot gale with a well-broken-in briar clenched in the bright defiant teeth; standing OOD on the bridge through the midwatch with only a dozing quartermaster and a faithful helmsman and a sewer-mouthed radar crew and a red-dog game in the sonar shack, along with the ripped-off exile moon and its track on the ocean for company" (LL, 90).

With the aid of his liberal memory, "that was the way he remembered it: there he had been, Dennis Flange in his prime, without the current signs of incipient middle age" (LL, 90). The present-day Flange has adopted as actual a romantic, stereotypic, literary sea scenario and an absurdly idealized self; he has substituted a picturesque environment and a picaresque salty-dog creation for what was, in truth, a mediocre naval engagement and a Dennis Flange most probably very similar to the present one.

In his imaginary world, even the Flange marriage is in full bloom, a situation much different from the actual one, in which the union, like the man, is "getting a slight beer belly and its hair was beginning to fall out" (LL, 90). The vividly real, infinitely more attractive sea picture Dennis has painted for himself provides an outlet, a fictional escape from the stifling disappointment and sterility of his actual failed life. When times become especially tense and frustrating, he voyages mentally into those exotic seas; when Cindy terminates their relationship permanently,

Dennis withdraws totally into a submarine world which seems to promise a reinstatement of that heroic Jolly Jack Tar.

As the present action of "Low-lands" opens, Flange's actions illustrate perfectly the personal wastepile which has become his life: at nine o'clock in the morning, having refused to go to work, he begins a day-long process of drinking homemade muscatel with garbageman, Rocco Squarcione. Until five-thirty in the afternoon, the two have continued their boozing, while Cindy has fumed and raged upstairs. When Pig Bodine appears at the Flange home from out of nowhere to visit his old Navy buddy, Cindy has had enough.

She has not seen the "foul ape in the sailor suit" (LL, 92) since the night before her honeymoon, when Pig took Dennis out for the "few beers" which were to constitute a belated bachelor party; the end of those "few beers" occurred two weeks later when Dennis wired from Cedar Rapids, Iowa for his fare home. Cindy offered Flange forgiveness on the stipulation that she never again set eyes on Pig Bodine, and although she has not until this moment, "her feeling that Pig Bodine was the most loathsome creature in the world had continued unabated for seven years" (LL, 92). His arrival is the last straw. Cindy kicks Dennis out for good and all, and as he makes his final departure from her, he is "still wondering vaguely why this should ever have happened" (LL, 90), thinking "maybe if they had had

kids . . ." (LL, 93).

With limited resources and no particular destination in mind, the trio heads for the local dump to stay with Rocco's friend, Bolingbroke, who is night watchman there. They pass through the outskirts of the Long Island Wasteland, composed of "nothing but housing developments and shopping centers and various small, light-industrial factories" (LL, 93). The road to the garbage dump proper is characterized by a geographical descent, and as the group travels down the long, winding trail, "it seemed to Flange that they must be heading for the center of the spiral, the low point" (LL, 94). When the truck stops at the exact mid-point of the spiral, Flange suddenly recalls an old Scottish sea-chanty about the "low-lands," realizing that the spot on which the truck is parked is also a low-lands area. Lower yet is the dump itself, which is sunken fifty feet below the streets which surround it. Each day, Rocco tells Dennis, two bulldozers bury the waste under the dirt filler, thereby raising the level of the floor a tiny bit daily.

An accomplished mole, Flange senses in this activity "a peculiar quality of fatedness," realizing that "one day, perhaps fifty years from now, perhaps more, there would no longer be any hole: the bottom would be level with the streets of the development, and houses would be built on it too. As if some maddeningly slow elevator were carrying you

toward a known level to confer with some inevitable face on matters which had already been decided" (LL, 94-95). Dennis sees a clear resemblance between his own existence and the activity at the dump, for frequently "he would picture his life as a surface in the process of change, much as the floor of the dump was in transition: from concavity or inclosure to perhaps a flatness like the one he stood on now" (LL, 96).

Appropriate to his physical and mental life of withdrawal and his passive, disinterested nature, Dennis considers with alarm any above-surface-level existence, which would leave him exposed and liable to personal involvement. With growing panic he worries about "any eventual convexity, a shrinking, it might be, of the planet itself to some palpable curvature of whatever he would be standing on, so that he would be left sticking out like a projected radius, unsheltered and reeling across the empty lunes of his tiny sphere" (LL, 96). Now bereft of the house and booth which sheltered him from exposure, Dennis finds himself too unprotected, too much in the open for his own comfort and broods darkly upon his situation.

Fortunately, his gloomy thoughts are interrupted by Bolingbroke's urgent exhortation to locate mattresses before darkness falls. Surrounded by tons of discarded debris, Dennis worms his way through "half an acre of abandoned refrigerators, bicycles, baby carriages, washing machines,

sinks, toilets, bedsprings, TV sets, pots and pans and stoves and air conditioners . . . thousands of mattresses" (LL, 97); having procured his bedding for the night, he enters the ravine leading to Bolingbroke's shack, a ravine with garbage piled twenty feet high on either side, which runs on for a hundred yards and finally leads to a small valley completely filled with hundreds of cast-off rubber tires. In the midst of this mammoth garbage world, which illustrates so devastatingly the waste of American lives and the degrading and senseless consumerism which will figure so notably in "Entropy," stands Bolingbroke's dilapidated, make-shift shack.

Surveying the accumulated debris enveloping the dwelling, Flange is struck by the thought that "this dump was like an island or enclave in the dreary country around it, a discrete kingdom with Bolingbroke its uncontested ruler" (LL, 97). As Joseph Slade suggests, the name Bolingbroke, taken from Shakespeare's history plays, has been chosen to denote mock-royalty.³ Bolingbroke's reign was one of rule-by-forfeit. This Bolingbroke reigns over waste, is king of an empire of discarded detritus. That Flange can see the dump as an "enclave in the dreary country around it" is a telling statement about the quality of his own life.

³Thomas Pynchon, p. 28.

Finally, after repeated warnings from Bolingbroke, Dennis and Pig--Rocco having returned to his rounds--join their host in his shack. Settled into an evening of drinking and story-telling, Pig begins the activity by relating a sea story about the time he and a friend stole a horse-drawn taxi in Barcelona, were chased by a platoon of Shore Patrolmen, assaulted the Intrepid crew and were shot in return. When it is Flange's turn to tell a sea tale, he yarns instead about a college fraternity prank and a female cadaver hung from a window. Pig protests the change of topic, only to have Dennis lie that he cannot think of a sea story offhand.

However, Flange knows that his evasion has been deliberate:

the real reason he knew and could not say was that if you are Dennis Flange and if the sea's tides are the same that not only wash along your veins but also billow through your fantasies then it is all right to listen to but not to tell stories about that sea, because you and the truth of a true lie were thrown sometime way back into a curious contiguity and as long as you are passive you can remain aware of the truth's extent but the minute you become active you are somehow, if not violating a convention outright, at least screwing up the perspective of things, much as anyone observing subatomic particles changes the works, data and odds, by the act of observing. So he had told the other instead, at random. (LL, 100)

By refusing to tell a sea story, Dennis has applied to himself Heisenberg's theory of indeterminacy or uncertainty. Restating Max Planck's discoveries which led to the birth of quantum physics, the German physicist Werner

Heisenberg maintained that while it is possible to determine the position of a particle and also possible to determine the velocity of a particle, it is impossible to ascertain both simultaneously; the more accurately one attempts to specify the position, the less accurately the velocity or momentum can be assigned.

In quantum theory, position and velocity, representing mutually antagonistic elements, are called a canonically conjugate pair.⁴ The slightest involvement in one aspect radically changes the result of the other; observation and consciousness itself are altering factors. In this instance, Flange and the sea story are a canonically conjugate pair. By invoking the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy, Dennis hopes to maintain the status quo aura of romance and excitement with which he has surrounded the sea; to allow any sort of change would have to alter, if not destroy, the quality and the construction of his fantasy world.

After Dennis' apparently irrelevant corpse story, Bolingbroke returns to the correct topic and spins a wild tale centering around personal exploits with a mad first-mate named Porcaccio, who is determined to instigate mutiny aboard a Panamanian-registered ship in order to invade Cuba

⁴Lila L. Gatlin, Information Theory and the Living System (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 98.

and claim the land for Italy. Deciding not to participate in the insurrection, Bolingbroke and a friend abandon ship, spend two months in Caracas with a barmaid named Zenobia, surrender to the Italian consul and finally return to Genoa. With this abrupt ending to the host's story, the three decide to call it a night. Before falling asleep, however, Bolingbroke warns his guests to ignore the noises of the gypsies, who live in the dump and emerge only at night; he assures them they are safe within his shack.

Unlike the other two, Dennis is elated by the prospect of gypsies. As a child he had believed in them, and now he feels relieved that they have not disappeared, for "it suited some half-felt sense of fitness; it was right that there should be gypsies living in the dump, just as he had been able to believe in the rightness of Bolingbroke's sea, its ability to encompass and be the sustaining plasma or medium for horse-drawn taxis and Porcaccio's. Not to mention that young, rogue male Flange, from whom he occasionally felt the Flange of today had suffered a sea change into something not so rare or strange" (LL, 102). The presence of gypsies, like the thrilling adventures of the watchman's story, serve to reinforce the fibers of Flange's carefully-woven dream world, a world belonging entirely to his swashbuckling double, that fictional image of a former self.

Having fallen asleep with these happy thoughts,

Flange is suddenly awakened early in the morning at an hour "somehow not intended for human perception, but rather belonging to cats, owls and peepers and whatever else make noises in the night" (LL, 103), a bewitching hour belonging to the realm of the imagination. A girl's voice is calling: "'Anglo . . . Anglo with the gold hair. Come out. Come out by the secret path and find me. . . . Come find me or I shall go away forever. Come out, tall Anglo with the gold hair and the shining teeth'" (LL, 103). Immediately perceiving that she is calling him, Flange, on second thought, realizes that the description is not accurate for his present self but is very close to that of "his Doppelgänger, that sea-dog of the lusty, dark Pacific days" (LL, 103).

Nonetheless, he follows the insistent voice through the maze of rubber tires, which finally tumble down upon him and knock him unconscious. Upon reviving, Dennis finds himself face to face with a wraith-like, beautiful girl; her name is Nerissa, and "she was a dream, this girl, an angel" (LL, 104). The couple then proceeds to wind its way to her home by descending through an old refrigerator, household appliances, a forty-eight-inch concrete pipe and, finally, a network of tiny rooms and tunnels. As Flange casts a final backward glance, he spies a human figure watching from a pinnacle above ground and hears suddenly the sounds of singing, guitar music and a fight in progress echoing in the darkness.

Leaving the sounds behind, Dennis follows Nerissa to her underworld home and enters a lavish, richly-decorated room. Sitting on the silk-sheeted double bed is a rat which, the nymph tells Dennis, is named Hyacinth, her only friend. Flange, now understandably confused, asks Nerissa why he has been brought here, to which the girl replies: "'The old woman with the eye patch who is called Violetta read my fortune many years ago. . . . She told me a tall Anglo would be my husband and he would have bright hair and strong arms'" (LL, 107). Reflecting momentarily on his own marriage, Flange looks to Nerissa, now cradling the rat, and thinks: "She looks like a child. . . . And the rat like her own child. . . . I wonder why Cindy and I never had a child. . . . a child makes it all right. Let the world shrink to a boccie ball" (LL, 107). With these thoughts, Dennis Flange decides on a woman, a self and a world. As he consents to remain with Nerissa, he looks into her face, where "whitecaps danced across her eyes; sea creatures, he knew, would be cruising about in the submarine green of her heart" (LL, 108).

As symbolized by the spiraling, downward movement through appliances, pipes and tunnels, Dennis reaches the farthest depths of his retreat when he withdraws into a fantasy submarine world with Nerissa. Casting off the last vestiges of the middle-aged, balding and boring Flange, who watches the departure of his double from the summit of the

trash-heap, Dennis mentally transforms himself into a permanent Jolly Jack Tar of those fabulous but fictional younger days. The sounds of the guitar music, singing and fighting, reminiscent of a method of sea-chanty telling "tinged with a truth of a special order" (LL, 95) and of the swashbuckling, manly adventure peculiar to sea life, herald Dennis' entrance into a world of pure fantasy.

Nerissa herself is a mental construct, as Flange says, "a dream;" she belongs to the romantic and personal Flange seaworld and will be everything Cindy has not been--a loving wife who cherishes and believes in the glorious image Dennis has finally and thoroughly adopted for himself. Hyacinth will be the child he and Cindy never had. Having now relegated himself forever to an imaginary underworld, Dennis Flange no longer fears the actual world or that previously-terrifying convexity. Should the real world shrink, he will not be exposed since he is, he believes, forever safe and sheltered in a submarine sanctuary.

Contrary to Dennis Flange's belief that he has discovered a paradisaal world wherein his most cherished fantasies will be fulfilled and made concrete, wherein will bloom the love and excitement and heroic self-image so conspicuously absent in the actual above-ground world, Pynchon, through carefully chosen and utilized references to the works of T. S. Eliot, has taken great pains to demonstrate that such is not to be the case. As the actual

physical world, in "Low-lands" microcosmically represented by the geographical area of Long Island, is strikingly similar to any number of Eliot's brown, arid lands, the fantasy seaworld into which Flange withdraws is equally bleak and sterile; neither region is conducive to a valid existence.

Just as Flange hasn't the inner resources to lead a positive, productive life in the real world, his retreat into an underworld fantasy existence only accentuates and strengthens the negative personal qualities which have doomed his Long Island life. Both of his worlds are barren Wastelands, and the personality and lifestyle of Dennis Flange are both cause and symptom of the sterility. To establish the desolation of the above and below-ground Flange worlds, Pynchon alludes, if sometimes unclearly, to Eliot's The Waste Land, a vision of modern day man.

The chief characteristic of contemporary man, especially in the sterile and stifling urban setting, is ennui, which, says Northrop Frye, "is not so much sin as the state of sin: it is kept from positive vice, not by virtue, but by the negative vices of indolence and fear."⁵ Eliot peoples his Waste Land with a non-humanity experiencing boredom and weariness; ennui is symptomatic of his arid, barren land.

⁵Northrop Frye, T. S. Eliot (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 51.

In Eliot's *Waste Land*, the medium of existence is a dead-alive indifference, a hellish sort of living non-living. There is no human community, each person passing his days in egocentric solitude. Frye comments that, existing in a world of shadows, ruins and corpses, the inhabitants live "the 'buried life' . . . of seeds in winter: they await the spring rains resentfully, for real life would be their death."⁶ Meaningful or loving relationships do not exist in this region, where "each man fixed his eyes before his feet"⁷ in cultivated isolation. All sexual unions are abortive, destructive and as barren as the land itself. As Northrop Frye observes, the *Waste Land* is a realm in which laughter, love and children are totally and conspicuously absent.⁸ In Eliot's work, living is merely a process of passively acquiring and accumulating corruption, moral, mental and physical decrepitude and decay. In borrowing a line from Canto 3 of Dante's *Inferno*--"I had not thought death had undone so many"--the poet emphasizes the *Waste-landers'* persistent and willfull blindness to the signs of renewal and their refusal of the possibilities for rebirth

⁶T. S. Eliot, p. 64.

⁷T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 39.1.65. Hereafter cited as WL.

⁸T. S. Eliot, p. 48.

and salvation.⁹

The actual world in "Low-lands" is a Wasteland very similar to T. S. Eliot's, and Dennis Flange serves well as a typical resident. Having accepted and endured a trivial, unremarkable existence, he has succumbed to inertia. So great is his lethargy that he no longer holds a responsible, mature attitude concerning his job, finding it acceptable and easy to play hooky from work for a day of drinking. His long-time reliance upon a fantasy world to supply the meaning in his life has contributed to a drab actual existence, for, as Jerry Bryant states, to be deprived of active consciousness "is to be thwarted in the achievement of a high intensity of individual satisfaction."¹⁰

Similarly, as Pynchon makes even clearer in V. and as Tony Tanner states, people preoccupied with fantasy projections are rendered incapable of loving anyone outside of those projections,¹¹ and Flange is unwilling to expend the physical or mental energy necessary to maintain a workable relationship with his wife, to prevent and subsequently

⁹Having no expertise regarding the works of T. S. Eliot, I will not attempt an explication of The Waste Land. Rather, as Pynchon carefully chooses many of Eliot's symbols and images and employs them to suit his own purposes and to reinforce his thematic concerns, I will simply draw attention to some of those allusions in order to elucidate Pynchon's usage and intentions.

¹⁰The Open Decision, p. 233.

¹¹City of Words, p. 164.

destroy the impasse that has fostered their individual isolation. Worse than the physical separation they experience by dwelling on different levels of their house is the mental separation they endure due to Cindy's hostile, materialistic attitude and Dennis' basic indifference.

Although Flange is quick to blame his wife for their failed marriage, much of the fault is his own. His life has been one long exercise in the Heisenberg theory; passivity is his ruling passion, and he has been truly committed to nothing and no one, including his wife. The only dedication Dennis feels resides in his love affair with the sea, but that, too, is a passive involvement, existing on a purely fantasy level. A vivid imagination and no effort maintains the relationship.

Over the seven years of their union, Cindy and Dennis have retreated from each other into separate worlds, she into a world in which the chief end is material gain and he into a world in which the primary objective is a deliberate evasion of reality. Their childlessness points to the emptiness of both worlds and is illustrative of the sterility of the Wasteland. The dump, a most important symbol in "Low-lands," serves as a metaphor for two distinct types of waste, one being the physical waste characterized by compulsive and unnecessary consumerism peculiar to a non-humanity which acquires things rather than develops fundamental human values, the other being the human waste which reveals itself

in a morally exhausted, apathetic and isolated populace.

In "Low-lands," Dennis Flange compounds the deadness of his already-sterile life by retreating further into subway worlds. In his relentless search for that "minimum and dimensionless point," that "assurance of perfect, passionless uniformity" (LL, 96), he first burrows as deeply as possible into the womb of his house. When that retreat fails to isolate him from reality, he delves from a partial reliance upon a fictional realm into a subsequent subway world, immersion in total fantasy. His withdrawals, symbolized by a series of geographical descents, place him progressively deeper into death-like existences and indicate further mental and moral decay.

Although Dennis believes his seaworld to be a paradise, a recurring Pynchonism, which Tony Tanner points out, is that, depending on the nature and utilization of them, some of "the fantasies we build to help us live represent, in fact, an infiltration of that death we think we are so eager to postpone. They represent an avoidance of reality, by substituting for it a fetishistic construction."¹²

Dennis' fetishistic construction is his seaworld. Convinced that the sea runs through his veins and is his true mother (LL, 89), he depends on that world to provide him with the minimum of life he possesses. By inverting the pagan and

¹²City of Words, p. 171.

Christian myth of water as the creation and sustenance of all life, by applying only negative allusions to Eliot's poem and ignoring the dualistic function of water as a destructive and re-creative principle, Pynchon reveals that Flange's submarine kingdom can offer no life at all; Dennis' underworld is nothing less than Dante's Inferno.

In moments of clearer reckoning, Dennis himself is struck by "a weird irrational association" (LL, 95) between his much-beloved sea and a low-land area. He recognizes that "under a special kind of illumination or in a mood conducive to metaphor" (LL, 95-96), a person observing the sea will notice, in spite of the motion of the waves, a kind of solidity. Under these circumstances, the sea "becomes a gray or glaucous desert, a waste land which stretches away to the horizon, and all you would have to do would be to step over the lifelines to walk away over its surface; if you carried a tent and enough provisions you could journey from city to city that way. . . . for Flange that immense clouded-glass plain was a kind of low-land which almost demanded a single human figure striding across it for completeness" (LL, 96). In these lines, Flange is unquestionably linked with the living-dead inhabitants of Eliot's poem, who wander aimlessly about in the Waste Land.

To reinforce an already-bleak picture, Pynchon borrows additional characters and situations from The Waste Land. By altering the Matilda-figure's role in "Low-lands,"

he transforms Dennis' seaworld into a void.

In The Divine Comedy, Dante attains the state of Adam before original sin as he enters Eden; there he recovers his innocent nature. It is in the garden that he meets the young Matilda, who is gathering flowers and whose brightly-shining eyes enrapture him, as will Beatrice's later. As Frye notes, Eliot, in turn, adopts this scene and scatters throughout his works the image of a secret garden, usually a rose garden, which is associated with beauty, childhood and innocence and in which appears a young Matilda-like girl.¹³ Flowered with good intentions and nostalgic memories, the rose garden is the world of might-have-been, the life one might have lived, which contrasts with the life one has actually lived. It is a world of wish-fulfillment. In The Waste Land, the Matilda-figure who resides in the garden is the hyacinth girl, and when the narrator meets her, he finds himself speechless and sightless, neither living nor dead and knowing nothing (WL, p. 38.1.39-40).

Flange's encounter with Nerissa, the hyacinth girl of "Low-lands," closely parallels Eliot's scene. Having fallen under a mountain of tires, he is rendered unconscious--a sightless state similar to being neither living nor dead. Having made a brief introduction, Dennis is

¹³T. S. Eliot, p. 53.

reduced to speechlessness, for he has "no idea what to say to her next" (LL, 105). Descending through the door of the refrigerator, like the "little door" which leads to Harry's rose garden in The Family Reunion, Dennis is led through a series of small openings to Nerissa's rose garden, wherein he is soon to believe that his wishes will be fulfilled, that he will be able to recapture a salty-dog life.

Although Dennis does not, the reader soon realizes that Nerissa's submarine world is a life-denying, sterile region. Pynchon's description of Nerissa's ornately decorated room provides a very close comparison to the picture of a room described in the first twenty lines of "A Game of Chess," a room Eliot employs to compare the love scene of Antony and Cleopatra with that of a bored, neurasthenic, wealthy modern-day woman. In "A Game of Chess," which portrays the abuse and misuse of sexuality, sex is a death principle, destructive rather than creative.

In Nerissa's domain, sex is also sterile and associated with death. In this realm, the heroine's 'child' is a rat named Hyacinth, and the reader is transferred to Eliot's "rats' alley" (WL, p. 40.1.115), the waste alley of death, a location in which the protagonist again knows, sees and remembers nothing. In "The Fire Sermon," it is a rat, "dragging its slimy belly on the bank" (WL, p. 43.1.188), which crawls through an accumulation of dead bodies and skeletal bones. Strongly linked to these death images, it

is doubtful that Hyacinth will insure fertility or fulfillment.

Pynchon further darkens his vision by introducing his version of Eliot's jaded clairvoyant, Madame Sosostiris. In "Low-lands," wherein the one-eyed Violetta foretells the union of Dennis and Nerissa, Pynchon intends violet as the color of death. In The Waste Land, the "violet hour" (WL, p. 43.1.220) marks the time when the bored and tired typist indifferently allows her body to be exploited, an act which denotes a full denial of humanity. Amidst the "violet air" (WL, p. 48.1.373) fall all the towers of the world's unreal cities; reverberating in the "violet light" (WL, p. 48.1.380) are the hollow sounds which echo out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

To conclude this compounded vision of a sterile and deathly world, Pynchon very clearly links Nerissa with the sea, which he has established concretely as a death principle. As Dante was captured by the light radiating from Matilda's eyes, so Dennis is fascinated by the whitecaps moving across Nerissa's eyes and envisions sea creatures "cruising about in the submarine green of her heart" (LL, 108).

Flange himself, without comprehending the full implications, recognizes that the sea is, or can be, a low-land. It also appears to be linked with death in his subconscious mind. When he refuses to tell a sea story to his friends,

he substitutes a corpse story,¹⁴ which he tells "at random. Or apparently so. He wondered what Geronimo would say" (LL, 100). Not implausibly, the Freudian Diaz might connect Dennis' established behavior pattern of passivity, resignation and withdrawal away from life and into fantasy and an "apparently random" choice of a story about death with Freud's theory of the death-wish, which, in Wylie Sypher's words, states that man seeks the ultimate pleasure of "an untroubled security of not-being" and that "the drag toward inertia (Thanatos) is constantly behind the self-assertion which we call living."¹⁵ Flange's preoccupation with and ultimate withdrawal into his fantasy sea kingdom could be an enactment of Freud's death-wish. In any case, Nerissa has not rescued him after all, for, if the actual world finds him enduring a dead-alive existence, the fantasy world, being a further removal underground, will intensify that deadness.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that the Wasteland, be it Thomas Pynchon's or T. S. Eliot's, has become what it

¹⁴The female corpse of Flange's substitute tale may be, as Joseph Slade suggests, representative of Eliot's Hanged Man (Thomas Pynchon, p. 29); it could also be "That corpse you planted last year in your garden" (WL, p. 39.1.71). More likely, however, the allusion is to Sweeney Agonistes and refers to the female cadaver kept in a bathtub full of lysol (Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 83), an incident intended to symbolize "the kind of ordinary life indistinguishable from death" (Frye, T. S. Eliot, p. 59), a theme of major importance in "Low-lands."

¹⁵Loss of the Self, pp. 75-76.

is because of the people who inhabit it. In "Low-lands," Pynchon discloses that Dennis Flange, "a legitimate child of his generation" (LL, 87) and thus a representative contemporary American, is both cause and symptom of the Wasteland; his mental and moral constitution doom his life to failure. To illustrate this point and to clarify and strengthen Dennis' negative personality traits and inept modes of existence, Pynchon alludes, if obliquely, to other Eliot poems. The similarities between the personalities of Flange and Eliot's Hollow Men and J. Alfred Prufrock are so striking that it is probable that Pynchon found the latter influential in shaping the character of Dennis Flange.

Certainly, Flange possesses characteristics of the Hollow Men. Echoing the emptiness of their world, the Hollow Men are neither living nor dead and have a lesser claim to existence than the "lost violent souls"¹⁶ in Hell, who took the initiative to make an earthly commitment, however wrong. Deadened to all stimuli, the Hollow Men respond passively to life, bending whichever way the winds blow. Their lives are spent in "death's dream kingdom,"¹⁷ an arid, twilight dream world, and the nursery rhyme, make-believe atmosphere of Part V mocks the hopes of their empty, real existences, thwarted at every turn.

¹⁶"The Hollow Men," in T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950, p. 56.

¹⁷"The Hollow Men," p. 57.

Dennis Flange's double can be discerned in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," another study of the self-romanticizing ego. Prufrock in this poem, like Flange in his story, addresses a "you" who is also himself and whom Frye describes as "a familiar compound ghost made up chiefly of memories."¹⁸ The "I," the actual, everyday Prufrock, lives in a waste world, death's other kingdom, which is distinctly separated from the paradisal, wish-fulfillment world, symbolized by the sea and singing mermaids, which houses his "you," a romantic, daring, sexual self. As Prufrock undertakes his visit, he proceeds through places which mark the sterility and stench of a blighted contemporary world. Passing through the Waste Land, he perceives the night in the aspect of etherization; with the additional metaphor of somnolence, the scene is one of inertia, torpor and stagnation.

At his moment of decision, the protagonist hesitates and passively watches his chance slip away. By refusing action, by remaining uncommitted and passive, Prufrock is destined to irrevocable failure. He will continue his boring regimen of timidly measuring out his life with coffee spoons.¹⁹ The dedication to the Prufrock volume quotes a

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, p. 54.

¹⁹ "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950, p. 5.

passage from Dante's Purgatorio, which concludes: "Treating shadows as a solid thing."²⁰ The shadow Prufrock concretizes is his fantasy seaworld in which lives his daring self. In the tedium of his ordinary days, the passive Prufrock will conjure up this world, linger

in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.²¹

Dennis Flange is a remarkably close facsimile of J. Alfred Prufrock. His *Wasteland* differs little, and Dennis, until the conclusion of "Low-lands," leads a double life. His trivial existence in the actual world is marked by lethargy and an inability to act decisively. Just as Prufrock desires to be etherized into inactivity and consciousnesslessness, so Flange enacts a sort of return to the tranquility and protection of the womb. Dennis has never attempted to cultivate an actual heroic self but has, at a much lesser expenditure of energy, created a fictional one. His wish-fulfillment world is also represented by the sea, his mermaids taking the shape of Nerissa, all of Prufrock's fifty Nereids rolled into one. When Dennis Flange withdraws totally into and accepts as reality a fantasy world with her, he, too, treats a shadow as a solid thing, for Nerissa herself is "almost a shadow," her hair a "black nebula" (LL, 104).

²⁰"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," p. 3.

²¹"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," p. 7.

Having passively allowed and then become disenchanted with the reality of his self and his life, Dennis Flange has undertaken a retreat to escape both; his withdrawal into a self-fashioned fictional world has placed him precariously in the midst of an even more stifling, life-denying world which will diminish, possibly extinguish, his already-sparse human capabilities. As Stephen Koch states, Pynchon's works reveal that one tendency of modern man, faced with the Wasteland, is "to deaden contact with the ordinary experience of life by allowing the imagination to replace it with some superficially more pleasant but sterile figment."²² In "Low-lands," Dennis Flange not only replaces his reality with a sterile figment but totally submerges in that substitute realm. His submarine withdrawal, like Benny Profane's sewer and subway retreats, Fausto Maijstral's withdrawal into inanimacy and the Tristero underworld retreat, while permitting an escape from an actual, antagonistic experience, insures at the same time a deadened, if not dead, refugee.

²²"Imagination in the Abstract," p. 254.

II

In "Low-lands," Dennis Flange bemoans the absence of communication and love in his marriage, unaware that his passivity and incessant daydreaming--his mental foetal position--have engendered the marital impasse. In V. emerges Flange's successor, Benny Profane, who also assumes the foetal position (V., 207). As Roger Henkle maintains, Profane, "though modeled partly on absurd literature's bum, is a reductio ad absurdum of that favorite American novel device, the 'honest, neutral' protagonist-observer who is sensitive but nearly inert."²³ Profane is a bum and is less than neutral and sensitive. Contrary to Flange, he consciously and actively chooses to have no meaningful relationships, deciding at every opportunity to give nothing of himself, although the women he encounters seem always to demand the opposite response. Through years of self-absorption, self-pity and an ever-growing complacency, Profane has cultivated a very genuine indifference, an indifference his self-styled and sustained schlemihlhood guarantees. When real human contact threatens his passivity, he readily barricades himself with his convenient excuse for non-involvement.

²³Roger B. Henkle, "Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," Modern Fiction Studies, 17, No. 2 (Summer, 1971), 212.

When Benny first meets Paola Maijstral, he realizes that she has endowed him "with all manner of healing and sympathetic talents he didn't really possess" (V., 9). His deficiency is a result of deliberate choice; he has espoused schlemihlhood and relies on a standard Profane maxim: "A schlemihl is a schlemihl. What can you 'make' out of one? What can one 'make' of himself? You reach a point, and Profane knew he'd reached it, where you know how much you can and cannot do" (V., 134). Benny has eliminated alternatives by deciding that he can and will do nothing; Jeremy Larner states: "Pynchon makes it clear that Benny Profane is a schlemihl not only by nature but by his own choice, implying that a schlemihl is simply a man who chooses to remain passive in every situation that life offers."²⁴ Profane's Flange-like passivity and genuine human concern are, like Heisenberg's velocity and position, a canonically conjugate pair; they are mutually exclusive.

Like Dennis before him, Benny has neither the energy nor inclination to establish human rapport. Being passive, he is, therefore, no risk-taker, and interpersonal relationships necessarily imply the elements of risk and uncertain outcomes; after all, "if you did take the trouble, even any first step, it meant stacking income against output; and who knew what embarrassments, exposés of self that might drag

²⁴Jeremy Larner, "The New Schlemihl," Partisan Review, 30, No. 3 (1963), 274.

you into?" (V., 334). Not Profane, certainly.

In The Open Decision, Jerry Bryant analyzes certain contemporary literary protagonists, Profane among them, and states: "In their 'casual independence,' subjects are responsible for the way in which they go about choosing from the world about them."²⁵ Living in a hostile and chaotic environment, some of those subjects, especially those with meager inner resources, succumb to the negative surrounding forces, lose or deny a valuable personal identity and, rather than strive to assert a self and make responsible choices, attempt "to get out from under a self, to escape from a heavy burden of freedom . . . to get beyond the self, beyond personality."²⁶ Profane, a most unheroic protagonist, denies his freedom and exercises his option in all situations by simply choosing not to choose. His "casual independence" has evolved into a total independence from all people, especially women.

Benny avoids relationships with women as certainly as he avoids the Street. When Fina, saintly sister of his alligator-hunting companions, demands more of him than he is willing to give, Profane begins "to tally his time in reverse or schlemihl's light: time on the job as escape, time exposed to any possibility of getting involved with Fina

²⁵The Open Decision, p. 232.

²⁶Sypher, p. 70.

as assbreaking, wageless labor;" Profane, "who knew that one wrong word would put him closer than he cared to be to Street level" (V., 123), backs off from Fina and into his self-fashioned schlemihlhood. Refusing to communicate and never understanding her need for affection, Benny wonders: "Why? Why did she have to behave like he was a human being. Why couldn't he be just an object of mercy? What did Fina have to go pushing it for?" (V., 123).

Benny's refusal to respond to Fina results, if indirectly, in her subsequent ravishment by the Playboys, but when he later encounters the hostile and accusing woman, Profane lamely retorts: "'Your ass . . . they would have got you sooner or later'" (V., 341). As Robert Richardson says of his reaction: "Benny's increasingly obvious callousness may seem like a willed indifference sheltering and concealing an intensely sensitive soul. But Fina's final appearance suggests that the indifference is real rather than feigned."²⁷ Profane simply does not care, as Rachel's concerted and futile attempts to engage him in a relationship prove.

Rachel's involvement with Benny is totally one-sided, again by Profane's choice. If she is willing to expend the energy and take the risk involved, he is not and warns:

²⁷Robert O. Richardson, "The Absurd Animate in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*: A Novel," Studies in the Twentieth Century, No. 9 (Spring, 1972), p. 38.

"'. . . I don't love anything, not even you. . . . a schlemihl like me takes and gives nothing back" (V., 346). Profane is unwilling to exert the energy or to make the commitment necessary to maintain a healthy relationship. Continuously relying on his schlemihlhood to shield and insulate himself, he insists that he cannot love and will not be other than he is, since "schlemihl's don't change" (V., 359). If he has not taken his "own flabby, clumsy soul and amplified it into a Universal Principle" (V., 359), as Rachel is led to believe, Profane nonetheless takes full advantage of his developed passive nature, which prevents him from ever having to expose the "bare brain, bare heart" (V., 360) she desires and which also guarantees that he will never be burdened with an interest in or a regard for others.

Benny Profane is in no way concerned with love; his desire to see people get together is "a little cynical, a little self-pitying, a little withdrawn . . . Though it springs from a self-centered concern, it is often as much as a young man like Profane ever does go out of himself and take an interest in human strangers" (V., 198). But his interest in his friends, if they can be called such, is equally minimal.

When Rachel sets out on her desperate endeavor to prevent Esther Harvitz's abortion, Benny's callous response is: "'I don't see why you're so excited. She wants to get her uterus scraped, let her'" (V., 334). He cannot or will

not comprehend Rachel's explanation of why she cares for her roommate; when she talks of human compassion, he thinks of sex, perhaps the one thing which does concern him. Since his chief desire is for "someplace to screw in private" (V., 197), Benny typifies the protagonist of the contemporary novel Stanley Edgar Hyman describes in "The Goddess and the Schlemihl;" Hyman states that the new anti-heroes of the Profane sort "are in neurotic withdrawal . . . They suffer from meagerness of aim, asking only to be physically gratified and otherwise to be left alone."²⁸ These are precisely Benny's goals. With his passivity at a peak, his human apathy genuine and his schlemihlhood intact, beyond obtaining the most creature comforts, Benny Profane desires only to avoid the dangers of the Street.

In V., one aspect of the contemporary Wasteland is represented by the Street, the area above ground; all streets collectively combine to form it, and it is a region appropriate to those who inhabit it. Hausdorf points out that it is symbolic "at least in part of manipulated human activity, with hints of radical politics,"²⁹ an element which will be closely examined in the following chapter. The Street, "the kingdom of death" (V., 309), is the region of tourism and

²⁸ Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Goddess and the Schlemihl," in Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time (New York: Horizon Press, 1966), p. 142.

²⁹ "Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," p. 260.

mob violence. It is also the home of the inanimate and is conducive to the aimless, directionless existence of Benny Profane. Although he seeks to deny the fact, Benny belongs to the Street.

Street-side, Profane is a passive wanderer with no established starting point or destination; he "could not care less about the past, and not very much about the present, either,"³⁰ with no concern whatsoever about his future. Remembering little more than his birthdate, rootless and seemingly familyless, he attempts to visit his parents only once in V. (they are not at home) and, shuffling along through his old neighborhood, walks "past his past, though who knew it? Not Profane" (V., 355). John Hunt observes that throughout the novel, whether in Norfolk, New York or Malta, "he is not on an obvious quest, has no apparent direction, makes no effort either to seek out or to avoid a group of friends from his old Navy destroyer The Scaffold or another group known as the Whole Sick Crew who lounge about New York City, mostly at their bar the Rusty Spoon."³¹ Profane, who is "not unwilling, not anticipating, not anything; merely prepared to float, acquire a

³⁰"V for Victory," rev. of V., Newsweek, 61 (1 April 1963), 82.

³¹John W. Hunt, "Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: The Novels of Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon," in Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 99.

set and drift wherever Fortune willed" (V., 344), is content to travel in whichever direction he is heading.

Jerry Bryant offers that Profane is as his name suggests; he is "an unsanctified man, irreverent though not rebellious, passively allowing himself to be carried by the current of experience rather than attempting to steer his own course toward discovery according to some goal."³² At home nowhere and everywhere, he belongs wherever he happens to be at any particular time, since any home he has is temporary (V., 427). Like Eliot's Hollow Men, Benny "reacts passively to any puff of momentum that happens to touch him; by himself he cannot initiate or construct anything--no project, no relationships, no dreams. His movement is a long flight from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular."³³

Appropriate to his character and lifestyle, street repair work, if anything, is his occupation; also appropriately, neither does he do it well nor is he devoted to it. Occupying a sizeable portion of Benny's time, roadwork merely keeps him in wine. As V. opens, the human schlemihl, since his discharge from the Navy, has "been road-laboring and when there wasn't work just traveling, up and down the east coast like a yo-yo; and this had been going on for maybe a

³²The Open Decision, p. 253.

³³Tanner, p. 165.

year and a half" (V., 2). Street-life, roadwork, does nothing for Benny but provide him with his fragmentary morality (V., 10) and an illusion of motion.

In spite of his many years Street-side, "Profane hadn't changed. . . . Road work had done nothing to improve the outward Profane, or the inward one either. Though the street had claimed a big fraction of Profane's age, it and he remained strangers in every way. Streets . . . had taught him nothing" (V., 27). Four hundred pages later, meandering the streets of Malta with Brenda Wigglesworth, whose "inside too was her outside" (V., 426), Benny reflects on his Street experiences and is forced to admit: "' . . . offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing'" (V., 428). At the end of the novel, while Brenda, with her seventy-two pairs of Bermuda shorts, contemplates a return to Beaver College, sloe gin fizzes and the blighted Good Life, Profane, somewhat sadder but no wiser, anticipates an eventual resumption of his position on any convenient Street, and "both agreed this was nowhere" (V., 426). Through all of his years of roadwork, Profane has learned only that each Street, all Streets, merely lead to more of the same.

Accompanying his awareness of the ubiquitous nature of the Street is an increasing fear of the toll it will exact from him. The Street is the domain of the inanimate, an object region where nothing is truly alive, and, perhaps

sensing the presence of an enemy too powerful for his scanty resources to combat, Profane is threatened. Don Hausdorf observes that, never understanding the essence of inanimacy or his own natural penchant for it, Profane's "aversion to the 'inanimate' is more instinctual than intellectual. Chained as he is to his anti-quest . . . he is incapable of achieving any perspective on men or events;" his instinctive fear of the Street's inanimacy "enables him to be horrified, but it is not enough to prod him beyond avoidism and into real comprehension."³⁴ Like his prefigurer, Profane, rather than actively rebel against a Wasteland world that is determined to deromanticize, dehumanize and destroy and rather than actively attempt to rid himself of his own inanimate tendencies, decides to eliminate the threat by withdrawing from it. Also like Flange, he attempts to find shelter and satisfaction in a subterranean world.

Lacking the capacity and character to decisively alter his schlemihl Street-role and ignorant of the fact that, by virtue of being a decadent, callous, self-pitying vagabond, he belongs Street-side, Benny becomes increasingly more terrified of the above-ground world. Somehow, after "more named pavements than he'd care to count, Profane had grown a little leery of streets . . . They had in fact all

³⁴"Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," p. 262.

fused into a single abstracted Street, which come the full moon he would have nightmares about" (V., 2). The most revealing of his nightmares is about a boy, standing in a Street, who unscrews a golden screw in his naval and loses his ass.

The recurring nightmare, the implications of which Benny does not fully understand, seems to hold some fascination, some measure of hidden meaning: "To Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine. It was always at this point that the fear started: here that it would turn into a nightmare. Because now, if he kept going down that street, not only his ass but also his arms, legs, sponge brain and clock of a heart must be left behind to litter the pavement, be scattered among manhole covers" (V., 30). The dream of the Street becomes more and more Profane's own, and the thought of his own inanimacy, which he mistakenly reckons as a purely physical and mechanical outside threat, terrifies him. He asks himself: "Was it home, the mercury-lit street?" (V., 30). Sensing that it is, Benny Profane withdraws into the underworlds of the sewer and the subway.

In the New York City sewers hunting alligators, Benny finds the escape for which he longs, escape from personal commitment and from the fear of inanimate objects, which he believes are determined to destroy him at every

turn Street-side. Actual things are less threatening underground; the shotgun which he would never touch Street-level even appears friendly, for "a shotgun under the street, under the Street, might be all right" (V., 33). Profane is comfortable and protected in the sewer, although his success as an alligator patrolman is far from spectacular.

When his patrol is about to be disbanded for lack of quarry--"what he'd been trying for a week not to think about: that he and the Patrol as functioning units of the Sewer Department had about had it" (V., 133)--Profane is heartsick. His tranquility is about to be shattered: "There was no more work under the Street. What peace there had been was over" (V., 137). However, soon after being compelled to resurface, Benny obtains another temporary solace as he engages in his remaining avoidance technique: subway yo-yoing.

Being long accustomed to Street yo-yoing, Profane is clearly an expert at the subway version, a pastime wherein he spends the entire day "like a yo-yo, shuttling on the subway back and forth underneath 42nd Street, from Times Square to Grand Central and vice versa" (V., 27). In no time at all and largely due to Profane, yo-yoing becomes the chief diversion for the Whole Sick Crew and a sport with very definite guidelines: "Rule: you had to be genuinely drunk. . . . Rule: you had to wake up at least once on each transit. Otherwise there'd only be a time gap, and that you

could have spent on a bench in the subway station. Rule: it had to be a subway line running up and downtown, because this is the way a yo-yo goes" (V., 282). So secure and isolated is Profane in his subway world that any resurfacing, any Street-level exposure, threatens him. He panics upon re-emergence and cries: "'Subway' . . . like the hunchback of Notre Dame yelling sanctuary" (V., 347).

In his underground existences, Benny Profane finds peace and believes himself to be safe from an encroaching inanimacy. Carl Hartman, in "The Fellowship of the Roles," offers that "the sewer is a retreat rather than Hell; the level under the Street has more direction to it than all the true clichés of the Street itself. . . . Or, if the sewer is Hell, it is preferable at times to the topside areas."³⁵ The sewer and its precisely-directed companion, the subway, are infinitely more preferable and pleasant than the above-surface Street. However, there should be no doubt as to the nature of those underworlds; clearly associated in V. with submarine territory,³⁶ both are as sterile

³⁵Carl Hartman, "The Fellowship of the Roles," Contact, No. 15 (July, 1963), p. 74.

³⁶In V., Benny observes an old bum, a subway yo-yoer, and reflects: "He must have been there all night, yo-yoing out to Brooklyn and back, tons of water swirling over his head and he perhaps dreaming his own submarine country, peopled by mermaids and deep-sea creatures all at peace among the rocks and sunken galleons . . . If under the street and under the sea are the same then he was king of both" (p. 199). In comparison with Flange's fear of surfaces is

as Dennis Flange's fantasy seaworld.

Underworld regions serve to reinforce Profane's passivity and inanimate tendencies. In the sewers, where "you don't see anything" (V., 33), he wanders aimlessly through the well-defined confines, only half-heartedly pursuing the death-seeking alligators, with which he feels an increasingly close affinity. At times he considers giving up even this most minimal exertion, "collapsing and just letting the stream float him out with pornographic pictures, coffee grounds, contraceptives used and unused, shit" (V., 109). Benny's withdrawal to the sewer may be a valid, if unconscious, enactment of Freud's death-wish; it is a return to a nearly inorganic, insular death-like state in which all outer stimuli are avoided. As Tony Tanner explains: "The sewer or under-the-street (also compared to under the sea) is that area of dream, the unconscious, perhaps the ancestral memory, in which one may find a temporary peace or oblivion,"³⁷ but where one may also undergo serious physical and mental deterioration. Underworld dwellers are "a weird collection . . . Mostly bums" (V.,

Profane's, for he is also "afraid of land or seascapes . . . where nothing else lived but himself. It seemed he was always walking into one: turn a corner in the street, open a door to a weatherdeck and there he'd be in alien country" (p. 12).

³⁷City of Words, p. 166.

100), and Benny Profane, visualizing himself in "every no-name drifter, mooch, square's tenant" (V., 335) is of their kind.

In the sewers Profane encounters groups no more promising than a maimed and disfigured society, "a generation of freaks and pariahs . . . a secret and horrible post-war fraternity. No good at all in any of the usual rungs of society" (V., 87). There he also encounters what remains of Father Fairing's Parish, so named after a lunatic priest who, during the Depression, decided that New York City's human population would die, while the sewer rats would emerge to take its place. Taking it upon himself to convert the rats to Catholicism, he descended into the sewers only to end his underworld years in defeat and despair. Discovering that his flock was going to "turn out no better than the animals whose estate they were succeeding to" (V., 107) and that his entire parish offered only one member with a soul worth saving (V., 108), Father Fairing's sewer mission resulted in total failure and provided him with only one comfort--a convenient place in which to die. The sewer is a death kingdom, home only for waste and filth, incorrigible rodents and a group of alligators that seeks death; even more than the Street, the underworld is inhabited by flotsam and jetsam for whom time holds no promise.³⁸

³⁸Henkle, p. 212.

The subway world is but another version of the same. Yo-yoing underground, Benny is able to maintain maximum passivity and lethargy as the vehicle carries him along on its exactly repetitious, circular route. Sleeping much of the time, he needs maintain only a spasmodic consciousness and a meager metabolism. Subway yo-yoing up and down Manhattan, going nowhere, is, as Richard Lehan insists, an absolute and ultimate decadence, for "Pynchon's yo-yo is the reductio ad absurdum of Adams' dynamo. The yo-yo translates into human terms the idea of motion without direction, energy without thought, life without meaning. To yo-yo is to abandon the will and to let the machine move us--to become a mechanical man."³⁹ The inanimate subway yo-yoers, Profane included, resemble a group of "vertical corpses, eyes with no life, crowded loins, buttocks and hip-points together. Little sound except for the racketing of the subway, echoes in the tunnels;" this sewer alternate, this underground amusement, is no more than "the Dance of Death brought up to date" (V., 282).

The peace which the sewer and subway offer Benny is of a dangerous sort; what he believes to be an escape from the threat of inanimacy is nothing less than an entry into death kingdoms which will insure for him the ultimate in non-existence and dehumanization. His descent to underworlds

³⁹ A Dangerous Crossing, p. 159.

is a retreat from a meaningless, meandering life into no recognizable life at all. Like the true mechanical yo-yo he is, Benny Profane is pulled in whichever direction seems to promise the shelters upon which he depends; as V. closes, he anticipates his next possible sanctuary--either an underground tunnel at Porte-des-Bombes or a sewer in Marsa, underground retreats on Malta.

As Dennis Flange withdraws mentally into a submarine fantasy world and Benny succumbs to inertness of mind and body through a dependence on sewer and subway shelters, Fausto Maijstral, in the historical episodes of V., enacts a desperate and deadly retreat from humanity into inanimacy. Suddenly confronted with the terror and tragedy of war-time reality, he avoids true contact with it via a series of progressively deeper withdrawals which accompany a steadily deteriorating self. Through the characters of Fausto I, II, III and IV, Pynchon illustrates Bergson's theory that personality is an aspect of the psychic states through which a person passes.⁴⁰ The four personalities of Fausto Maijstral and the psychic states indicative of them reveal how one man chooses to deal with the Wasteland; they also reveal that some choices are fatal.

The personality of Fausto I had its existence before the war began to ravage Malta. Naively idealistic and full

⁴⁰Sypher, p. 59.

of pretentious rhetoric, Fausto I formed with friends Maratt and Dnubietna a triple alliance called the "Generation of '37," a primary objective of which was to create a grand school of Anglo-Maltese poetry. Dividing into three areas the tasks of alleviating human suffering and initiating a new Golden Age, Maratt was to be a politician, Dnubietna an engineer and Fausto, "a young sovereign dithering between Caesar and God" (V., 286), a priest. Pre-1940 was a glorious period for the first Maijstral, who wrote then: "I felt as do many young men a sure wind of Greatness flowing over my shoulders like an invisible cape" (V., 285).

However, the year 1940 and the first falling bombs abruptly shattered the "Generation's" idealism, altruism and intellectualism; the drastic change in external events demanded a different sort of commitment to reality, and the projected goals of the movement were subordinated to the immediate task of survival. Fausto I was an optimist who discovered that "once the inadequacy of optimism [is] born in on him by an inevitably hostile world" (V., 289), he must engage a new personality in order to endure his altered environment. The horror of the war extinguished his idealistic self; Fausto I became "a young man in retreat" (V., 290-91) and withdrew into the protection of concepts and abstractions.

As the island averaged ten raids per day, Fausto's

literal withdrawal to underground shelter was accompanied by a withdrawal into Fausto II, a personality which allowed a camouflage of the war's actuality. The journal entries of that time revealed a shift from objective, detailed descriptions of his surroundings to elaborate apostrophes and eulogies to Malta, "sudden shifts from reality to something less" (V., 290). Implicit in that shift to something less was the disintegration of Fausto's self, a disintegration characterized by several avenues of withdrawal: retreat into poetry; retreat into dreams of the Grand Knight, La Vallette, and of a time "when personal combat was more equal, when warfare could at least be gilded with an illusion of honour" (V., 295-96); retreat into a lesser humanity, evidenced in his strained marital relationship and a near-indifference to the "ongoing vast--but somehow boring--destruction of an island" (V., 291); and, finally, retreat into a sense of limbo, represented by the image of slow Apocalypse, wherein time itself was devoid of meaning and the Maltese people apparently "laboured and sheltered in timeless Purgatory" (V., 296). Fausto II's fascination for the conceptual provided him escape from the reality of the surrounding war-world.

Concomitant with the withdrawal into abstraction was a disjunction of the sensibilities which characterized his Anglo-Maltese heritage. As a member of the "Generation of '37," Maijstral experienced his identity as a

unity; he was decidedly and contentedly an Anglo-Maltese. As Fausto II, however, he sensed a personal being progressively more Maltese and less British. The second Fausto split into a dual man who experienced a conflict between the two elements of his heritage; he was unsure whether "to be merely Maltese: endure almost mindless, without sense of time? Or to think--continuously--in English, to be too aware of war, of time, of all the greys and shadows of love" (V., 289). The first war-time Fausto was a deteriorating Anglo-Maltese, "aimed two ways at once: towards peace and simplicity on the one hand, towards an exhausted intellectual searching on the other" (V., 289).

As the holocaust continued, with Fausto II degenerating into Fausto III, Maijstral became increasingly more Maltese and less British, began to perceive experience as pure sensibility. He gradually descended "towards that island-wide sense of communion. And at the same time towards the lowest form of consciousness" (V., 294). As his movement toward the Maltese enabled him to identify with the rock, with the island of Malta itself, it also allowed him escape into a sort of oblivion in which he realized only "a brute clinging to awareness, nothing else" (V., 299).

A progressive sense of his own non-humanity prompted Fausto, in the latter stages of his second personality, to write in his journal: "Are we only animals then. Still one with the troglodytes who lived here 400 centuries

before dear Christ's birth. We do live as they did in the bowels of the earth. Copulate, spawn, die without uttering any but the grossest words. Do any of us even understand the words of God, teachings of His Church? Perhaps Maijstral, Maltese, one with his people, was meant only to live at the threshold of consciousness, only exist as a hardly animate lump of flesh, an automaton" (V., 289). Fausto II, imprisoned in abstraction, had abstracted himself. The shedding of a true intellectual awareness of the war and the retreat into minimum consciousness initiated the emergence of Fausto III, the least alive Maijstral personality which evidenced the fullest denial of humanity.

The progression of the second Maijstral to Fausto III was both a return and a retreat: "Fausto II's return was the most violent of all. He dropped away from abstraction and into Fausto III: a non-humanity which was the most real state of affairs" (V., 297). If the abandonment of abstraction and mystical exaltations was a "retreat from retreat" (V., 297), it did not imply a return to real life on Malta. In the process of ridding himself of the conceptual and descending into Fausto III, Maijstral underwent an absorption of the island's rock-like qualities, an absorption which, Robert Richardson maintains, protected him from the severity and pain of his own feelings;⁴¹ the

⁴¹"The Absurd Animate in Thomas Pynchon's V.," p. 49.

retreat from abstraction was not a return to life but a movement toward decadence, a withdrawal into non-humanity, valuable only "as a kind of demystification, or as a retreat from romantic projection."⁴²

The third Fausto marked the depth of disintegration, for that personality was "the closest any of his characters comes to non-humanity. Not 'inhumanity,' which means bestiality; beasts are still animate. Fausto III had taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city" (V., 286). As a buffer against the terror and destruction rampant on the island, Fausto mentally assimilated the "lovely inanimateness in the world around him" (V., 302). To avoid the reality of a war-time Malta which he could not change and with which he could not cope, Fausto sought to extinguish the torment of consciousness; in doing so, he relinquished the will to live and his own humanity, thereby reducing the world and himself to nothingness.

As World War II continued, the Maltese people inched inexorably toward non-humanity; they "all shared this sensitivity to decadence, of a slow falling" (V., 297), and Fausto himself began to contemplate "the time when like any dead leaf or fragment of metal they'd be finally subject to the laws of physics" (V., 301). Progressively more rock-like,

⁴²Richardson, p. 50.

Fausto III gave up all of his fragmentary but residual beliefs, as his decadence denied the existence and possibility of sustaining myths like the value of human struggle or the worth of love and compassion; it affirmed, rather, the inconsequentiality of human life, the dominion of accident and the absence of meaning, design and order.

Fausto III's accommodation-avoidance withdrawal involved especially an evaporation of faith in a benign providence and an estrangement from the supreme commander of the forces of the universe.

The third Fausto's divorce from a sustaining faith in a concerned, just and benevolent deity was not the result of a calculated, rational decision but an inevitable consequence of his loss of humanity, his own estrangement from self; as Fausto II and III became progressively less human, God simply became more alien. Maijstral and his "Generation" did not forsake their faith in God after a lengthy intellectual struggle but simply because they had "got out of the habit, had lost a certain sense of themselves, had come further from the University-at-peace and closer to the beleaguered city" (V., 309-10). Withdrawing into the successive personalities which would insulate and protect him from the terror and toll of war-time reality, Maijstral's avoidance processes necessitated an alteration of self which admitted neither time nor use for the effort of will required to maintain his previous religious beliefs

and practices.

Having himself devolved from an idealistic Fausto I destined for priesthood to Fausto III, he "realized that the old covenants, the old agreements with God would have to change too. For at least a working relevancy to God therefore, Fausto did exactly what he'd been doing for a home, food, marital love: he jury-rigged--'made do'" (V., 310). The God so perfectly harmonious with pre-war Malta and pre-war Fausto was not at all appropriate for the ravaged island or regressing man. Surveying the surrounding havoc, the random bombing and indiscriminate dying of his people, Fausto was unable to translate into rational terms or to transfuse with purpose or design what was occurring on the island. He, therefore, resigned himself to belief in one thing--pure chance.

The ruling God had become Accident, and Fausto gleaned from the absurdity of his existence what he called life's single lesson: "that there is more accident to it than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane" (V., 300). This negative faith constituted his altered relationship with God, and the new covenant became a tacit agreement that "He will forget about my not answering His call if I cease to question. Simply survive" (V., 307). Having thus dispensed with an operational faith and all ritual religious conventions, attributing all external events to chance, Fausto "simply survived" as a rock-like

inanimate with "no further need for God" (V., 324). The oblivious nature of his personal condition enabled him to endure mindless of a concern for himself or his family; in his state of comatose withdrawal, he remained scarcely aware of the war on Malta.

Fausto III plunged to the nadir of his existence, the most perfect point of his withdrawal into inanimacy, on a day of Luftwaffe strafings; the formulation of the third Maijstral was completed on the Day of the 13 Raids, which brought about the death of his wife, Elena, and his only encounter with the Bad Priest. Yet, it was the same horrifying meeting with the transvestite priest which hurtled him back into life.

As Fausto wrote in his journal, the war had made him immune to any accident of life; it had prepared him for anything but this most terrible of all: "His youth . . . had vanished abruptly with the first bomb of 8 June 1940. The old Chinese artificers and their successors Schultze and Nobel had devised a philtre far more potent than they knew. One dose and the 'Generation' were immune for life; immune to the fear of death, hunger, hard labour, immune to the trivial seductions which pull a man away from a wife and child and the need to care. Immune to everything but what happened to Fausto one afternoon during the seventh of thirteen raids" (V., 303-04). On that afternoon, Fausto returned to animacy because of the hideous death of Lady V.

and his own passive participation in her murder.

The sixty-year-old V. was on Malta during the war disguised as one known only as the Bad Priest. About the clergyman, Fausto had heard only scattered rumors, his Confessions revealing that "no one knows his name or his parish. There is only superstitious rumour; excommunicated, confederates with the Dark One. . . . A sinister figure" (V., 293). If information about him was confused, Maijstral knew his preaching was considered unorthodox, advocating, as he did, abstinence from all human emotion and involvement.

Sermonizing to the children in the streets, the Bad Priest preached a religion based on inanimacy: "The girls he advised to become nuns, avoid the sensual extremes--pleasure of intercourse, pain of childbirth. The boys he told to find strength in--and be like--the rock of their island. He returned . . . often to the rock: preaching that the object of male existence was to be like a crystal: beautiful and soulless. . . . 'Seek mineral symmetry, for here is eternal life: the immortality of rock'" (V., 319). The Bad Priest, who had advocated abortion for Elena Maijstral, espoused a return to the inert, preached in theory what Fausto III had practiced in fact. The children, on the other hand, disregarded the Bad Priest's teachings, finding only an evil fascination in the man himself.

While Fausto and other adults like him had succumbed

to non-humanity and coped with the debacle by becoming as lifeless as their island, the Maltese children had preserved their essential humanity by making a game of war, understanding only that bombs destroy people as indiscriminately as buildings. Changing their lifestyles to live within a changed world, they engaged in mock RAF strafings and internecine skirmishes and traversed Malta's capitol by means of private underground routes. They retained their animacy by relating directly to war-time reality, by "noting what Governor Dobbie wore, what churches had been destroyed, what was the volume of turnover at the hospitals" (V., 317). Confronting an actual situation, the children formed a sort of impromptu conspiracy, the chief targets of which were the war, the adults and, especially, the Bad Priest, whom they shadowed about Valletta silently and secretly for three years. It was this conspiracy which resulted in the death of the Bad Priest, a death Fausto III did nothing to prevent.

Having been notified of his wife's death during a raid, Fausto walked, emotionally void, through the Street, the kingdom of death, and came upon the Maltese children shouting hostilely, clustered around the Bad Priest, who was wedged under a fallen beam. Circling around them, Maijstral retreated to a near-by rooftop and passively watched as they annihilated their adversary. Mocking the wounded clergyman with "'Speak to us, Father'" and "'What

is your sermon for today?" (V., 320), they began to disassemble him.

Having pulled off the hat and removed the long white wig, the children discovered the priest to be a lady. They removed her black outer shoes, the gold slippers within and her artificial leg. Having stripped her totally, they then began to mutilate her body. As one boy dug the star sapphire from her naval with a bayonet, "one pried her jaws apart while another removed a set of false teeth. . . . the children peeled back one eyelid to reveal a glass eye with the iris in the shape of a clock. This, too, they removed" (V., 322). Only the sirens signaling the onset of another raid deterred the children from a complete disembowelment of the Bad Priest; they scattered with their treasures, leaving V. crying in agony and Fausto III observing from the rooftop.

Apparently, the sight of the mutilated priest and the recognition of his own tacit consent to her murder shocked Fausto III back to the humanity from which he had deliberately withdrawn. Terrified, he went to the dying V., gave her what he remembered of Extreme Unction and attempted to hear her last confession, explaining later in his own Confessions: "At the time I only knew that a dying human must be prepared" (V., 323). The real reason for his actions both evades and haunts the subsequent Fausto. Perhaps he saw in V. the non-humanity he was, saw in her his

own state of non-being which allowed him to watch passively a murder, saw that Fausto III was no more animate than the Bad Priest, composed as she was of inert matter. Perhaps, as Raymond Olderman suggests, "with the rubble of a bombed waste land stacked around him he saw the future of the century, the cryptograph V. as a whole, revealing the terror of everyone's annihilation, the terror that all of us could be dismantled by our own future as the children dismantled Lady V.." ⁴³

For whatever reason, Fausto was horrified into animacy and personal involvement. Having touched V., he was jolted back to reality: "Her lips were cold. Though I saw and handled many corpses in the course of the siege, today I cannot live with that cold. . . . touching her lips my fingers recoiled and I returned from wherever I'd been. . . . I knelt by her and began to pray for myself" (V., 323). Maijstral's brief encounter with the Bad Priest resulted in an abrupt movement from non-being to humanity; it initiated the death of an inert Fausto III and the birth of Fausto IV.

With the (apparent) death of V., Fausto began an ascent back to life. It was a step which remains for him, as Fausto IV, poet, man of letters and author of The Confessions, an inexplicable mystery. At the conclusion of the apologia he admits: "Of Fausto III's return to life,

⁴³Beyond the Wasteland, p. 141.

little can be said. It happened. What inner resources were there to give it nourishment are still unknown to the present Fausto. This is a confession and in that return from the rock was nothing to confess" (V., 323). The extent of the mystery involved in his regeneration is embodied in two haunting questions: Why did he survive the war having once broken his agreement with God? And why did he not prevent the murder of the Bad Priest? To neither can he give a satisfactory answer. Perhaps, he hopes, knowledge will come through an altered covenant with God; perhaps The Confessions will serve to exorcise the guilt of murder, "a sin of omission" (V., 324). Perhaps not. In either case, Fausto IV directs his efforts toward attaining a balanced, rational humanism.

Inheritor of a physically and spiritually broken world (V., 286), Fausto IV is in the process of a slow return to consciousness and humanity. He has experienced the result of withdrawal into consciousness and conscienceless inertness; his own actions have depicted "what can happen when man loses a sense of his humanity, when a redeeming fiction fails him in a world gone power-mad."⁴⁴ As he explains in his Confessions, the persistent and haunting memory of the Bad Priest forbids another such retreat: "Often, when I fall asleep at my desk, the blood supply to

⁴⁴Lehan, p. 183.

an arm is cut off. I wake and touch it and am no further from nightmare, for it is night's cold, object's cold, nothing human, nothing of me about it at all" (V., 323).

Having discovered first-hand what can happen when man denies his humanity and forsakes his fictions, Fausto IV, states Robert Richardson, finds "the salvation of human beings as human beings to be a matter of caring for human values in spite of that indifference he knows to be the primary quality of the world external to the human mind."⁴⁵ If the apologia serves to help Maijstral analyze the events of his life and the personalities which have been assumed and discarded in the making of Fausto IV, it is also intended as a moral guide for his daughter and a symbol of his love for her. If he cannot yet affirm a genuine faith in the existence of a benevolent and controlling God, his sustaining myth is that delusion is necessary to insure the survival of whole human beings.

Now a man of letters, Fausto IV has assumed as his task that of fostering the delusion of the necessity of asserting humanity and human will in the face of a hostile, incomprehensible world. He maintains that he and poets like himself "are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the

⁴⁵"The Absurd Animate in Thomas Pynchon's V.," p. 47.

'practical' half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they . . . It is the 'role' of the poet, this 20th Century. To lie" (V., 305). Richardson concludes that, espousing the pervasiveness, the efficacy of humanity, "the delusion which Fausto cultivates is intended to protect and foster something real, if only because it keeps asserting itself under the most adverse circumstances."⁴⁶

The presence of Fausto IV concludes The Confessions on a note of optimism. As stated by Raymond Olderman, Maijstral's regeneration, his retreat from withdrawal "is decidedly meant to illustrate the possibility of reversing the trend toward annihilation, of coming back from the inanimate and recovering from the scars of war and the sight of V.. Having lived through the war and having seen the Lady V. meet her death, Fausto has gained the essential knowledge of life, death, and the twentieth century. . . . Until his regeneration Fausto's progress from youth to war-weary cynic--from Fausto I to Fausto III--is a model of what Pynchon means by decadence and the movement toward the inanimate."⁴⁷ The personality of Fausto IV indicates that, in spite of the random and threatening nature of the

⁴⁶"The Absurd Animate in Thomas Pynchon's V.," p. 55.

⁴⁷Beyond the Wasteland, p. 140.

universe, the range of response--from humanity to inanimacy, from passivity to activity--is a matter of human choice.

In existentialist fashion, Pynchon, through Fausto Maijstral, asserts that each person creates a self by volition, by choosing or refusing a response appropriate to a situation; each person attains a positive or negative selfhood through a choice of actions. In ultimately rejecting a withdrawal into inanimacy and developing a rising consciousness and self-conscious humanity, Fausto determines upon a positive response; his assertion of humanity via the fostering of a necessary delusion is an affirmative act of will in the face of a meaningless Wasteland. For these reasons, the story of Fausto Maijstral is optimistic. But Pynchon is rarely, and then only guardedly, optimistic. Several important passages in The Confessions indicate that Maijstral may have exchanged a denial of humanity for a permanent hothouse retreat. If so, he has entered into another type of withdrawal and chosen a plan of action, or inaction, as negative as his retreat into inanimacy.

In the hopes of acquiring a rational perspective on the personalities and events of his life, of gaining "eyes clear enough to see past the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and event, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with reason" (V., 286), Fausto IV has immersed himself in the past, immured himself in a hermetically-sealed hothouse measuring 17 x 11½ x 7 feet.

The room itself "is the past . . . sealed against the present," and Fausto IV defines himself primarily as an occupant of the room (V., 285). Oblivious to present reality, "the present Fausto can look nowhere but back on the separate stages of his own history" (V., 310). The apologia examines events during the war years only; there is no trace of the Fausto who lived between the Day of the 13 Raids in 1943 and the writing of The Confessions in 1956. Entrapped in his hothouse, Fausto is again a man in retreat from reality. He resides in "an interregnum. Stagnant . . . Hermetic: for who can hear the Dockyard whistle, rivet guns, vehicles in the street when one is occupied with the past?" (V., 287). If the hothouse will enable Maijstral to interpret his past, it will destroy his ability to live effectively in the present. A withdrawal such as he has undertaken, if permanent, is imbued with danger and is an absurd mode of existence, a fact Pynchon makes explicit in "Entropy."

III

The Crying of Lot 49 is Pynchon's most conscious, sustained attempt to deal with the causes and possibilities of withdrawals and underworlds. As Robert Sklar states, this short novel displays the author's pervasive concern "with worlds and anti-worlds, and worlds within worlds;" Lot 49 is a book with "a sense of mystery, a vision of fantasy, that expresses itself in dualisms, in images of surface and depth, of mirrors, of secret societies and hidden worlds."⁴⁸ This second book also reveals, as Richard Poirer maintains, that Pynchon truly is, "after Hawthorne, the American writer with the deepest kind of skepticism about the advantages of being 'included' by the culture America has inherited and shaped."⁴⁹ In The Crying of Lot 49, the surface world is the habitat of the "included" American Establishment majority. Existing here are the powerful and the possessors, those who accept and foster a static and rigidly-structured mode of life and who passively conform to the functions and roles which the society they have created demands. Opposed to this surface world is Tristero, an underworld composed of the discarded and

⁴⁸Robert Sklar, "The New Novel, USA: Thomas Pynchon," Nation, 205 (25 September 1967), 278.

⁴⁹Richard Poirer, "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon," Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 152.

dispossessed, the ostracized and obsolete, the powerless minority who are unwilling or unfit to assume the labels which surface society assigns.

From its origins in sixteenth century Europe, Tristero--if there actually is a Tristero--has blossomed into a vast system of underground communication and subversive, albeit passive, rebellion. As Oedipa Maas' discovery of muted posthorns multiplies, she suspects that large numbers of Americans have withdrawn from the surface society that denies, demands and dehumanizes and have entered into an underground Tristero exile. Collections of society's waste and refuse, the conspiracy members, appropriately, keep in touch through W.A.S.T.E., a rival postal system whose mail boxes are public trash cans.

But whether or not Tristero exists is a question which vexes the reader almost as much as it haunts Oedipa Maas; the subversive underworld upon which she stumbles, and which is to become her obsession, may or may not be a conspiracy hundreds of years old. In Thomas Pynchon's fictional world, the reader confronts the same problem which besets the questing Oedipa--that of distinguishing fact from fantasy.

Pynchon infuses his stories and novels with such an astonishingly immense amount of factual information that, at times, the factuality appears to be fiction and vice versa. Richard Poirer states:

in Pynchon the factuality seems willingly to participate in the fiction . . . Crazy names like Pierce Inverarity turn out, when we do a little investigation, to be a compound of a quite famous, real-life stamp collector named Pierce, and of the fact that if you should go to Mr. Pierce for the kind of flawed and peculiar stamps so important in The Crying of Lot 49 you would ask him for an "inverse rarity." What sound like crazy schemes turn out to have been actual experiments, such as Maxwell's Demon, again in The Crying of Lot 49, or historically important institutions like Thurn and Taxis. With one very slight exception all of Pynchon's material in The Crying of Lot 49 about that postal system is historically verifiable.⁵⁰

So firmly rooted in the factual is the Tristero conspiracy that Oedipa unearths a considerable amount of information about its origins and evolution. From clues and leads she acquires, she is able to piece together what she believes to be the history of the Tristero.

According to Oedipa's sources (and the historian/fabricator, Thomas Pynchon), the Tristero, a 400-year-old tradition of postal fraud, began as violent opposition to the established postal service of the Holy Roman Empire, the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly. In 1577, the northern provinces of the Low Countries, led by William of Orange, were struggling for independence from a Catholic Spain and a Catholic Holy Roman Empire. When William successfully conquered Brussels, he replaced Leonard I, then postmaster,

⁵⁰"The Importance of Thomas Pynchon," pp. 156-57.

with his own loyal follower, Jan Hinckart, Lord of Ohain. At this time, the Tristero conspiracy began its subversive activity. Its founder, Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera, "perhaps a madman, perhaps an honest rebel, according to some only a con artist" (Crying, 119), claimed that he, as Hinckart's cousin and from the legitimate Spanish branch of the family, was true Lord of Ohain and, therefore, rightful heir to all Hinckart possessed, including his appointment as Grand Master of the Post for the Low Countries and executor of the Thurn and Taxis monopoly.

Being denied what he believed to be his by birth, Tristero waged guerilla warfare against his cousin until Brussels was retaken for Emperor Rudolph II in 1585; at that time, Leonard I of the Taxis family was reinstated as Grand Master. For political reasons, however, the Emperor withdrew his patronage from the postal system, which consequently underwent a period of instability. The opportunist Tristero deemed this an appropriate time to establish his own postal service. He propagandized on the theme of disinheritance and styled himself El Desheredado; as the posthorn was the coat of arms of Thurn and Taxis, Tristero adopted as his symbol the muted posthorn and outfitted his followers in black livery, "black to symbolize the only thing that truly belonged to them in their exile: the night" (Crying, 120). The Tristero conspiracy began a secret campaign of terror and destruction along the Thurn and Taxis

mail routes and carried out its activities designed to mute the posthorn for the seventy remaining years of the Empire.

Oedipa discovers that what happened as the Empire began to crumble and Thurn and Taxis to disintegrate is less clear. Possibly the conspiracy was divided into factions, some wishing to maintain status quo activities and others wishing to conquer the vulnerable postal system. When Thurn and Taxis died with the demise of the Holy Roman Empire, speculation about the nature and activities of Tristero mushroomed; rumors assumed such enormous proportions that by 1795 the Tristero, transformed into a monstrous entity, was credited with causing the French Revolution. It was then rumored that another schism occurred, and the aristocratic members withdrew from the conspiracy. The remaining members subsequently "drifted on, deprived of nearly all the noble patronage that had sustained them; now reduced to handling anarchist correspondence" (Crying, 129-30) and lending support to lost causes in Europe. The majority of members, however, evidently migrated to America during 1849-50.

If Tristero had hoped to establish a postal system in America, 1840 was an unfortunate time to migrate. In the mid-1840's, the United States Government had enacted widespread postal reforms which resulted in the termination of smaller, independent mail services; by 1880, the U.S. postal monopoly had successfully quashed all competitive

carrier services. Although forsaking the idea of setting up an independent mail system, the Tristero accepted the challenge of the American government on an altered basis. Again Tristero defined itself in terms of opposition and rebellion: "By 1861 they're well-established, not about to be suppressed. While the Pony Express is defying deserts, savages and sidewinders, Tristero's giving its employees crash courses in Siouan and Athapascan dialects. Disguised as Indians their messengers mosey westward. Reach the Coast every time, zero attrition rate, not a scratch on them. Their entire emphasis now toward silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance" (Crying, 130).

Beginning in America, then, as a force opposed to the Pony Express and Wells Fargo, its disciples dressed as outlaws in black or disguised as Indians, the Tristero continued and expanded its activities as the country grew. When Oedipa becomes involved in the Tristero mystery, she quickly discovers that, whatever it is, it appears to be alive in present-day America. Still surviving in the context of conspiracy, its silent membership is composed, as during the Holy Roman Empire, of the disinherited. However, if the original Tristero membership was composed of those who stood in opposition to the established postal system, the present-day conspiracy has evolved to include a broad spectrum of discarded derelicts, surface society misfits and cast-offs. The rebels find in the contemporary Tristero

communion with those opposed to a society of rigidly-structured organization and depersonalizing efficient technology. The rebels find refuge in an organization which tolerates individual differences and diversity and cherishes the uniqueness of the human self. Each member differs from or refuses to accept the established norm of surface society and is unable or unwilling to live within its confines.

As Oedipa quests her way through the mysteries of Inverarity's testament, she encounters many of these aliens. At the Scope, a Tristero bar, she meets Mike Fallopian, proselytizing member of the Peter Pinguid Society, an organization named after a Confederate Commodore who, in 1864, discovered in a naval encounter an apparent alliance "between abolitionist Russia (Nicholas having freed the serfs in 1861) and a Union that paid lip-service to abolition while it kept its own industrial laborers in a kind of wage-slavery" (Crying, 33). The PPS pits itself against "industrial anything" (Crying, 33), including government monopolies like the postal service, and vents its rage by compelling PPS members to send at least one letter per week through a Tristero-operated delivery system. Fallopian is convinced that the Civil War was staged, at least in part, to suppress private mail delivery systems and that the "feeding, growth and systematic abuse" (Crying, 35) of the federal postal system was evidenced in the suppression of independent mail routes. It is an optimistic Mike Fallopian

who informs Oedipa that new Tristero chapters are springing up throughout the country.

In the legend of the founding father of Inamorati Anonymous and a chance meeting with Stanley Koteks, Oedipa discovers that many men fall victim to the machine and are discarded as waste. The founder of a group of Tristero isolates composed largely of failed, would-be suicides found himself automated out of a job at the age of thirty-nine since, trained only to sign his name to memos he could not decipher, "he could not begin to understand and to take blame for the running-amok of specialized programs that failed for specialized reasons he had to have explained to him" (Crying, 83). When the executive later decides to commit suicide, an efficiency expert exclaims: "'Nearly three weeks it takes him . . . to decide. You know how long it would have taken the IBM 7094? Twelve microseconds. No wonder you were replaced'" (Crying, 85). Inamorati's founder finds acceptance only in the Tristero underground.

Similarly, Yoyodyne employee Stanley Koteks has presumably joined the conspiracy because of Yoyodyne's clause on patents, which states that every engineer must relinquish individual rights to future inventions, and the company's teamwork policy. Oedipa's initial bewilderment over Koteks' behavior and attitude is later dispelled when she is told by Fallopian:

"Sure this Koteks is part of some underground . . . an underground of the unbalanced, possibly, but then how can you blame them for being maybe a little bitter? Look what's happening to them. In school they got brainwashed, like all of us, into believing the Myth of the American Inventor--Morse and his telegraph, Bell and his telephone, Edison and his light bulb, Tom Swift and his this or that. Only one man per invention. Then when they grew up they found they had to sign over all their rights to a monster like Yoyodyne; got stuck on some 'project' or 'task force' or 'team' and started being ground into anonymity. Nobody wanted them to invent--only perform their little role in a design ritual, already set down for them in some procedures handbook."
(Crying, 63-64)

As Robert Sklar comments, it is to men like John Nefastis, who refuses to sign away his patent rights and individuality, that Tristero opens its arms, since "the w.a.s.t.e. system puts to use moral and human energies that the surface system--the United States Government and the dominant American mode of life, as Pynchon makes explicit--lets go to waste."⁵¹ Persons such as the Inamorati founder, Koteks and Nefastis are the refuse of a mammoth, efficiency-obsessed, industrial/capitalistic society. In the next chapter it will be seen that consumerism and a vastly uneven distribution of wealth, by-products of that society, have even greater tragic results for contemporary Americans, forcing great numbers of the poverty-stricken into the Tristero underground.

⁵¹"The New Novel, USA," pp. 279-80.

Just as Tristero accepts the human discards of a depersonalizing industrial society, it also shelters those who cannot or will not conform to the standards of a white majority, with its ritualized patterns of belief, behavior and success orientation; the underworld is refuge for an astonishing number of deviates. As Oedipa travels California's cities in search of muted posthorns, she discovers that the symbols also identify the ethnic minorities and long-time losers. The Tristero symbol appears in the presence of any who are denied entrance into the "normal" American society.

In Chinatown, the posthorn is seen in the shop window of an herbalist and on the jackets of a gang of juvenile delinquents; it decorates the anarcho-syndicalist paper of a clandestine exiled Mexican confederacy. When the posthorn appears on a laundromat bulletin board in a black neighborhood and on a bus transporting black passengers, Oedipa begins to wonder: "Was The Horn so dedicated?" (Crying, 90). Having witnessed a young Mexican girl tracing the symbol on a bus window, the sleuth next discovers two conspicuous Tristero members at the San Francisco airport, one a poker player on a twenty-three-year losing streak, the other an Oedipally-complexed, "uncoordinated boy who planned to slip at night into aquariums and open negotiations with the dolphins, who would succeed man" (Crying, 90-91).

As time passes, Oedipa encounters even stranger Tristero members, including:

a facially-deformed welder, who cherished his ugliness; a child roaming the night who missed the death before birth as certain outcasts do the dear lulling blankness of the community; a Negro woman with an intricately-marbled scar along the baby-fat of one cheek who kept going through rituals of miscarriage each for a different reason, deliberately as others might the ritual of birth, dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of inter-regnum; an aging night-watchman, nibbling at a bar of Ivory Soap, who had trained his virtuoso stomach to accept also lotions, air-fresheners, fabrics, tobaccos and waxes in a hopeless attempt to assimilate it all, all the promise, productivity, betrayal, ulcers, before it was too late; and even another voyeur, who hung outside one of the city's still-lighted windows, searching for who knew what specific image. (Crying, 91)

When Oedipa attempts to ferret out the location of the local W.A.S.T.E. disposal center, she finds it, appropriately, under the freeway amidst "drunks, bums, pedestrians, pederasts, hookers, walking psychotics" (Crying, 96). The members of the Tristero, unacceptable by surface society standards, represent, it seems, every type of misfit known to contemporary America.

In short, Oedipa discovers what Erik Wensberg terms "a sort of subcontinent of the obsolescent, a union of the cracked and damned, silently watching 'undergrounds,' beaten by the controls of organized society--each, in its lush battiness or isolation, making up a station of the Tristero

System."⁵² She encounters what must be a conspiracy of the withdrawn and alienated, and "decorating each alienation, each species of withdrawal, as cufflink, decal, aimless doodling, there was somehow always the post horn" (Crying, 91).

Having personally witnessed a Tristero-operated mail delivery, seen W.A.S.T.E. stamps, postmen and a mailbox, conversed with confessed members and discovered "the image of the muted post horn all but saturating the Bay Area" (Crying, 98), Oedipa reluctantly must admit that the Tristero conspiracy might certainly exist, that its membership might be vast indeed, for "here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private" (Crying, 92).

Wandering through the subcultures of California, Oedipa has encountered a vast network of the disinherited, communicating and surviving in opposition to the known world of the majority. Besides those she has discovered,

⁵²Erik Wensberg, "The Crying of Lot 49," Commonweal, 84 (8 July 1966), 447.

Mrs. Maas becomes certain that "she might have found the Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she'd looked" (Crying, 135). Having observed these societal cast-offs, Oedipa finds it increasingly difficult to deny the existence of their underground anti-world: "Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world" (Crying, 92). By the end of The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa is convinced of the reality of that world, if only to satisfy a desperate personal need, and wonders: "How many shared Tristero's secret, as well as its exile?" (Crying, 136). It seems appropriate to ask: How many do not?

The underworlds of San Narciso, Los Angeles, San Francisco and, most probably, the entire country seem to overflow with the unfortunate, the alienated, the discarded, the unfit and the forgotten; they comprise the Tristero, if it exists. So also do those who feel betrayed by the American myths which falsely affirm the equality of all persons; or the uniqueness and worth of the individual; or a Horatio Algerian success for the industrious; or the unalienable, unhampered guarantees of liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Annette Kolodny and Daniel Peters state that, disillusioned by the betrayal, these Americans,

through the aid of Tristero, "have kicked down the mythical props supporting America's glittering, comfortable skin and returned to their instincts, their dreams of self, grotesque though they may be. . . . Rather than buy America's dull dream, they seek their own."⁵³ The questions to be asked are: What dream do they seek? If Tristero exists, what form does the conspiracy take, and what is the nature of the rebellion? Having withdrawn from American society, what are the intentions and goals of the Tristero members? And what are the prospects for achievement and success?

Although Oedipa never solves the riddle of the Tristero, she formulates an hypothesis for its *raison d'être*. Apparently a conspiracy in opposition to an America which has so ignominiously excluded it, Tristero exists in "twilight . . . aloofness;" engaged in a revolution whose activities are neither actively treacherous nor treasonous, the conspiracy members are resigned to "waiting above all; if not for another set of possibilities . . . then at least, at the very least, waiting for a summery of choices to break down, to go skew" (Crying, 136). Dreaming of a future reinstatement, Tristero members, withdrawn and isolated in their secret subworld, silently await the day when people, esteemed for individual value, again assume an

⁵³Annette Kolodny and Daniel James Peters, "Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49: The Novel as Subversive Experience," Modern Fiction Studies, 19, No. 1 (Spring, 1973), 80.

importance above and beyond that of mere machines, the day when humanity is revitalized and rehumanized. They await the day when they will be able to resurface into a Republic which does not restrict, define or impose upon its citizens narrow and rigid patterns of behavior and thought. When that day arrives, the Tristero members will re-emerge to claim their inheritance, which Kolodny and Peters define as "a future shaped by their own desires, not a carbon copy from some outdated guidebook."⁵⁴ Until that time, the conspiracy is content in its waiting.

Withdrawal has been chosen as an alternative to the Wasteland. Tony Tanner maintains that "since the surface society and official communications system are so spiritually impoverished and dedicated to lies, since indeed so much of the visible America seems given over to denying human variety and turning people into objects, perhaps The Tristero . . . represents a 'real alternative!'.⁵⁵ Similarly, Annette Kolodny and Daniel Peters assert: "The Tristero is at once another dimension of consciousness and a truer means of communication. And as such it reflects a very real response to the betrayal so many of us now feel when once we had dared dream of the legacy of America."⁵⁶

⁵⁴"Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," p. 80.

⁵⁵City of Words, p. 178.

⁵⁶"Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," p. 86.

From a close examination of the novel, however, it is more than intimated that although the Tristero retreat is an alternative, it is neither a valid alternative nor can a truly positive existence be maintained in that underground withdrawal. Of the chances for a Tristero reinstatement or a future inheritance, Pynchon offers no hope.

William Vesterman states that as early as V., Pynchon introduces "his fascination with the preterite, the passed-over, the disinherited, the out-of-it. It is a fascination strong enough to stimulate his imagination through at least fifteen years and three books, and is expressed most generally in characters by The Loser, in theme by Lost Causes."⁵⁷ In a similar vein, Roger Henkle maintains that the author has "a genuine compassion for those in America who are left out, for the lonely, the grotesque, the uprooted and the forgotten."⁵⁸ Neither statement can be denied. In V., Pynchon's sympathy is extended to the victims of colonialism and imperialism, among others; in Lot 49, to all those society waste products who comprise the Tristero; in Gravity's Rainbow, to the Preterite, the passed-over. But his compassion does not imply optimism.

That the author commiserates with the lost ones whenever and wherever they have appeared in history is readily

⁵⁷William Vesterman, "Pynchon's Poetry," Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 215.

⁵⁸"Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," p. 212.

discernible in all of his works. That he believes injustice and inhumanity will someday be eradicated is nowhere in evidence. Pessimistically aware of the unchangeability of the human condition throughout time, Pynchon, with anger, contempt, even anguish, recognizes that the situation and human nature have never been nor will ever be better.

Always there have existed slaves and masters, von Trotha's and Bondels, Caligula's and Christians, Chivington's and Sand Creek Cheyenne, Pilate's and Christ's, Hitler's and Jews; and always there have existed the poverty worlds of Biafra, Harlem, Appalachia and the Bosque Redondo Reservation. Pynchon's works consistently point to the facts that such has been, and such will be. History continues to repeat itself; it recapitulates the same patterns (V., 145). Tristero, refuge of the exiled and wasted and unwanted, will prove no exception to the rule, will enjoy no exchanged utopian future.

That the prospects of the Tristero enterprise are dismal may be inferred from the images of sterility and death with which it has been associated throughout its supposed existence. As Oedipa unearths bits of historical information about the conspiracy, she discovers that it stands in opposition to God's will; according to the Scurvhamites, the Tristero was the "brute Other" and came to serve as symbolic mascot of the death cult (Crying, 117). Often connected with wars and rebellions, it represented

to many a force of "implacable malice" (Crying, 124). When Oedipa examines illustrations of The Courier's Tragedy, she is admonished to "notice how often the figure of Death hovers in the background" of Tristero-related pictures (Crying, 116), and when she examines several Tristero stamps, she discovers them to be sinister-looking, their backgrounds displaying skulls, faces of fright or absolute menace or deadly varieties of flowers like the Venus fly-trap, belladonna or poison sumac (Crying, 131). She then remembers that many of Pierce's stamps displayed miniature pictures of Adolph Hitler.

Through the days of the Civil War and Pony Express, Tristero was actively treacherous, thriving on assassination. Then, as its emphasis shifted toward "silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance" (Crying, 130), it expanded its membership to include a new assortment of malcontents and misfits. A brief review of that membership will reveal that Tristero's present population is no more appealing or promising than that of surface society and that its withdrawal is a form of stasis, if not a slow dying. That Oedipa discovers beneath the posthorn the legend "Don't Ever Antagonize The Horn" (Crying, 90) has very telling implications; taking the first letter of each word, the legend is DEATH.

In her encounters with the Tristero membership, Oedipa discovers an intensely cynical, suspicious, paranoid,

self-pitying, unhappy underground population. Roger Henkle writes of the conspiracy: "In a kind of pathetic self-assertion, each of these despairing souls opts out of the life of the Republic into a personal retreat, and in doing so, cuts himself off from love and communication."⁵⁹ Indeed, both seem to be conspicuously lacking in the underground. The secret communication which is the conspiracy's trademark is scarcely successful, being as shallow as the "Hi-How-are-you?-See-you-later" message about which Mike Fallopian bitterly complains (Crying, 35). To maintain even a minimal volume of this superficial intercourse, every member is compelled, under threat of punishment, to send one letter per week. With each member residing in relative isolation and some in complete anonymity, real communication is at a low ebb for Tristero.

Similarly, love is hardly thriving, and if the Inamorati Anonymous campaign succeeds, love--"hetero, homo, bi, dog or cat, every kind there is" (Crying, 85)--will be abolished absolutely, since, according to IA, it is "the worst addiction of all" (Crying, 83). Pynchon has taken great pains in his short stories and novels to show that a world without love is an arid, dead world. At the same time, he decries the perversion of love, the sick decadence which manifests itself in the Wasteland. If that perversion

⁵⁹"Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," p. 213.

is evidenced in society-at-large, it is equally visible within the Tristero, which accepts, without question or restraint, every form of sexual deviancy.

Within the conspiracy reside Kirby, whose forte is massed "sophisticated fun" (Crying, 34), and John Nefastis, who, like Mucho Maas, has an affinity for school-age girls and who prefers all of his sexual encounters to coincide with television programs about Viet Nam or China because, as he tells Oedipa, "'that profusion of life. Makes it sexier, right?'" (Crying, 79). One branch of the underworld, the Alameda County Death Cult, holds regular meetings and devotes its primary activities to perversion and murder: "Once a month they were to choose some victim from among the innocent, the virtuous, the socially integrated and well-adjusted, using him sexually, then sacrificing him" (Crying, 90). The Tristero picture is a grim one, for the conspiracy tolerates within its confines the activities and attitudes which have created the Wasteland world surface-side. As the name implies, the "wretched, depraved" (Crying, 75) miscreants who make up the Tristero would prove to be undesirable in any society.

Charles Harris seems to believe that Pynchon intends the Tristero to serve as a viable alternative to the surface void, that the conspiracy embodies his hope for society and reveals the author's desire for "a radical freedom, an anarchist ball where one dances to his own

rhythms, not to the ritualized beat of mass society."⁶⁰

That the author finds mass society to be ritualized and sterile is certainly true; that he believes Tristero to be the appropriate response to that blighted world is not, for a Tristero world is one which would give free rein to anarchists, psychotics, neurotics, sadists and masochists, drug addicts, sexual perverts and murderers. This cannot be Pynchon's hope for a blighted world, for in itself it is only a subterranean version of that surface void.

There are other reasons for predicting that the Tristero will prove ineffective in the end. Having retreated from society as it is, the underground members, rebellious only within the confines of the conspiracy, do nothing which constitutes a positive attempt to change the status quo of surface society and to bring into being a better order. Its present form of existence is no threat to a static visible society, for Tristero is but an "unsuspected" world. By its very passivity the withdrawal is a negative response. Peter Abernethy states of the Tristero membership that "its perverted subjects are wasted creatures who are unable to find a positive answer to the general nullity they have had the horror to recognize."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd, pp. 98-99.

⁶¹ "Entropy in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," p. 22.

By retreating underground, the conspirators--if not giving tacit consent to what is--have merely discovered a way to avoid the responsibility incumbent on each individual to deal actively and positively with reality as it exists. It is worth remembering that the direct and readily-visible actions of such agents as black militants and the American Indian Movement have brought results that decades of silent suffering and passive waiting could not; a survey of history reveals that only concerted, organized effort directed forcefully toward a predetermined end has the power to alter a society prone to maintaining or deteriorating from the status quo. The Tristero is no such organization. During its presumed American existence, it has accomplished nothing constructive and exists unbeknownst to non-members. United neither physically nor psychically, its members are content to dwell in pockets of isolation, drowning in lethargy or acting out their frustrations and fantasies for fellow conspirators, idly dreaming of a coming inheritance.

Over the years, however, a number of the withdrawn have even forgotten what it is they are to inherit. Those who still cherish dreams of reinstatement and inheritance cling to a notion as ludicrous as John Nefastis' invention; Maxwell's Demon, the dream of several inventors since the nineteenth century, can never function. And an ominous question haunts the pages of The Crying of Lot 49 as Oedipa

asks for herself and Tristero: "What was left to inherit?" (Crying, 135). As "Entropy" will make clear, the answer is: "Nothing." The society Tristero hopes to regain and refashion at some undetermined future date is caught in an irreversible process of decay which will end only in an equilibrrious steady-state. What the conspiracy hopes eventually to inherit is a closed and dying system, and the Tristero, in its withdrawal and isolation, its passivity and lethargy, is a similar system. Thomas Lyons and Allan Franklin insist that the acronym W.A.S.T.E. testifies to the entropical nature of the underground world and describes the final state of entropical disorder.⁶² Oedipa at one point wonders if the conspirators could have withdrawn into a vacuum. The answer is "Yes," for by the very choice of withdrawal rather than action, the Tristero members have substituted a subterranean void for a surface void.

⁶²Thomas R. Lyons and Allan D. Franklin, "Thomas Pynchon's 'Classic' Presentation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics," Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Language Association, 27 (1972), 198.

THE HOTHOUSE AND THE STREET:

SUCCUMBING TO THE SECOND LAW

"The unhealthy atmosphere of the whole age;
and its rampant meanness even in violence;
the one sided flabbiness of America, the
want of self-respect, of education, of purpose;
the intellectual feebleness, and the material
greed,--I loathe it all."

--Henry Adams,
in Henry Adams: The Major Phase--

"Entropy" is certainly Thomas Pynchon's most important short story and is generally agreed to be his best. Paradoxically, it is both his most pessimistic and optimistic short work. "Entropy" contains Pynchon's vision of a society deteriorating culturally, morally and intellectually. With the scientific concept of entropy serving as the central metaphor, the author discloses that society's death on all levels is inevitable and inescapable, that the coming end--the heat-death--is a fact. The response to the established situation, however, is a matter of personal choice and can be either negative or positive in nature.

A negative response, and a variation of the alternative revealed in "Low-lands," is withdrawal into the past, into the hothouse, which admits no filtering of present reality. A positive response entails an attempt, albeit futile, to counteract disorder with order, to reduce chaos

by imposing pattern. This sort of desperate alternative--the exertion of effort which is destined to be wasted--is one of the few active responses available in the Wasteland, where effort is everything and the only thing of an affirmative nature. While "Entropy" presents a vision of nihilism, it also holds out the possibility of at least a minimal sense of purpose and accomplishment.

As Earl Shorris states, Pynchon "has become a philosopher of the worn-out world, an implier of entropy, a pitchman for the comedy of death,"¹ and for the entropic vision in this short story and in his subsequent works, he is much in the debt of nineteenth and twentieth century scientists, communication theorists and the American historian-scholar, Henry Adams. "Entropy" is a complex work, and a full understanding and appreciation of its many implications as well as its relevance to the novels cannot be achieved without at least a layperson's familiarity with the major premises contained in the laws of thermodynamics, the hypothetical being called Maxwell's Demon, the principles of information theory and the pessimistic writings of Henry Adams. Therefore, the first section of this chapter will concern itself with the scientific theories and literary works which have a direct and crucial bearing on Pynchon's works and which will elucidate the author's

¹"The Worldly Palimpsest of Thomas Pynchon," p. 80.

intentions in the short story.

The field of thermodynamics rests on three major laws, all of which have been variously stated throughout the past decades. The first of these laws, concerning the conservation of energy, maintains in its very simplest form that matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed. Based on experimentation with heat engines, the first law of thermodynamics, as summarized by W. Ehrenberg, states that "the total amount of energy in an isolated system remains unchanged while internal changes of any kind occur."² In greater detail, in any closed system, heat (expressable in terms of energy) can be converted into work and vice versa; the amount of work in any closed system must be equal to the amount of heat; thus, total energy in an isolated system is constant in amount, since the quantity of energy lost as work will reappear as heat.

The second law of thermodynamics, which is of greatest importance to Pynchon, is directly related to laws of probability and to the kinetic theory of matter. In 1824, in an essay entitled "The Motive Power of Heat," Sadi Carnot made several important pronouncements which were later to be utilized and expanded upon by Clausius and Helmholtz in Germany and William Thomson (afterwards Lord Kelvin) in England. Most importantly, Carnot stated that every heat

²W. Ehrenberg, "Maxwell's Demon," Scientific American, 217, No. 5 (November, 1967), 109.

engine needs a hot body, to serve as a source of heat, and a cold body, to serve as a condenser, and that as the engine works, heat passes from the hot to the cold body.³ In spite of mistaken and incomplete views on heat and energy, state Lyons and Franklin, Carnot correctly discovered that heat cannot be transformed completely to work, for a complete conversion "would represent a transformation of disordered energy, a replacement of random molecular motion by orderly bulk motion."⁴

Combining Carnot's theories and premises set forth on the kinetic theory of gases by James Joule in the 1840's, Rudolf Clausius' subsequent theory of entropy and its tendency toward the maximum, furthered by Lord Kelvin's principle of the dissipation of energy, firmly established the second law of thermodynamics, which shows the impossibility of producing an inequality of temperature or pressure without the expenditure of work. The second law says, in apparent contradiction to the first law, that energy is never saved, that while the sum of energy might remain constant, the power of energy tends always to fall lower in a limitless process.

³Sir William Cecil Dampier, A History of Science and Its Relations With Philosophy and Religion, 3rd ed., rev. and enl. (1942; rpt. New York: Macmillan Co., 1946), p. 253.

⁴"Thomas Pynchon's 'Classic' Presentation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics," p. 196.

In 1850, Clausius stated: "It is impossible for a self-acting machine, unaided by any external agency, to convey heat from one body to another at a higher temperature."⁵ In other words, in any closed system wherein an exchange of heat occurs between a hot and cold body in an on-going and self-sustained process, the heat must always transfer from the hot and to the cold body. Clausius further stated that although it is possible to convert an entire quantity of work into heat, the reverse is not true. Sir William Dampier clarifies: "In steam engines and other heat engines it is found that only a fraction of the heat supplied is transformed into mechanical energy; the remainder, which passes from hotter to colder parts of the system, does not become available for the performance of useful work."⁶ The difference between the initial quantity of work taken from the source and the quantity of heat given up to the condenser provides the maximum amount of heat available for conversion into work; this difference is a very small amount. From these findings came Clausius' concept of entropy, or the measure of unavailable energy in a closed system.

Expanding on this principle, Clausius posited that the unavailability of energy to do work is an irreversibly increasing process. He saw that as heat continuously

⁵Ehrenberg, p. 104.

⁶A History of Science, p. 254.

transfers to the colder body, the entropy will increase until both bodies are uniformly cold, and the system is left with no energy. He concluded his findings by allowing the applicability of the principle of entropy to any large isolated system. Postulating that the universe itself is a closed system, he predicted its eventual heat-death via his formula, which showed that the entropy of the universe tends toward a maximum. Clausius was convinced, according to Lyons and Franklin, that even in the cosmos, "any spontaneous transformation . . . is from a 'higher,' more ordered form to a 'lower,' less ordered form."⁷

Somewhat later, Lord Kelvin made discoveries similar to those of Clausius and introduced them in 1852 in a paper entitled "On a Universal Tendency in Nature to the Dissipation of Mechanical Energy." Kelvin found that the only time mechanical work can be done occurs when heat passes from a hot to a cold body and that this process in itself diminishes the temperature difference between molecules. Temperature is further reduced by conduction and friction. He concluded, as did Clausius, that the availability of energy becomes less, while the converse tends to a maximum. Summarily, according to Kelvin's theory, energy in an isolated system eventually becomes so uniformly distributed that it is unavailable as a source of useful work; the

⁷"Thomas Pynchon's 'Classic' Presentation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics," p. 197.

system must become inert. Kelvin posited that the law of dissipation must be extended to the universe and wrote:

- 1) There is at present in the material world a universal tendency to the dissipation of mechanical energy.
- 2) Any restoration of mechanical energy, without more than an equivalent of dissipation, is impossible in inanimate material processes, and is probably never effected by means of organized matter, either endowed with vegetable life or subjected to the will of an animated creature.
- 3) Within a finite period of time past, the earth must have been, and within a finite period of time to come, the earth must again be, unfit for the habitation of man as at present constituted, unless operations have been, or are to be performed, which are impossible under the laws to which the known operations going on at present in the material world, are subject.⁸

Compounding the accumulated theories of Carnot, Clausius and Kelvin were the statistical contributions of James Clerk Maxwell, Ludwig Boltzmann and J. B. Watson. Maxwell and Boltzmann, working with the kinetic theory of gases (a basic premise of which is that atoms or molecules act on each other by direct collision), applied Gauss' findings of law and error derived from probability theory to the distribution of molecular velocities and discovered that molecules, undergoing chance collisions, could be divided into groups which would eventually move according to certain

⁸Henry Adams, A Letter to American Teachers of History (Baltimore: J. H. Furst Co., 1910), pp. 3-4. Hereafter cited as Letter.

ascertainable velocities. The two scientists determined that molecules, originally moving at various velocities, would finally move according to the most probable arrangements; this phenomenon came to be known as the Maxwell-Boltzmann distribution.

Continuing similar investigations, Boltzmann and Watson recognized that the Maxwell-Boltzmann "most probable" distribution state was equivalent to the tendency of thermodynamics' entropy to reach a maximum.⁹ An isolated system will spontaneously change from an arrangement of greater order and less probability to an arrangement of lesser order and more probability; an inverse relationship must always exist between order and probability.¹⁰ Dampier states: "The process of reaching this most probable condition, in which the entropy is a maximum and the velocities distributed according to the law of error, is analogous to the shuffling of a pack of cards."¹¹ The correlation between entropy and card-shuffling will be explored in greater detail when the analogy becomes prominent in The Crying of Lot 49.

⁹Clausius' concept of entropy could be redefined as the value applicable to the average or most probable state of a system; in other words, "the thermodynamic condition of maximum entropy or greatest dissipation of energy is reached when molecules have their velocities distributed in accordance with the Maxwell-Boltzmann law, the probability of which is a maximum" (Dampier, p. 257).

¹⁰Lyons and Franklin, p. 196.

¹¹A History of Science, p. 251.

As has been shown, the laws of thermodynamics were founded by combining the findings of various men. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, it was known that to obtain useful work from any supply of heat, a temperature inequality is necessary. In an isolated system, wherein irreversible changes occur, heat energy steadily becomes less and less available for the production of work as the heat reaches a uniform temperature throughout the system. In other words, the entropy increases. Finally, it was known from Clausius' investigations that in any thermally-isolated system, where the amount of heat is constant, equilibrium will set in when the entropy reaches a maximum; at that point, no further work can be done.

Sir William Dampier elucidates the irreversible process by means of the following illustration: "The kinetic theory of gases enables us to translate into molecular terms the process by which entropy increases. If we began with two vessels with an equal number of molecules in each, one vessel being hot and the other cold, the average energy and velocity of the molecules in the first would be greater than in the second. If the vessels were put into communication, molecular collisions would equalize the average molecular energies, till the distribution of velocities was that of the law discovered by Maxwell and Boltzmann. This represents the final state."¹² This final state of

¹²A History of Science, p. 481.

equilibrium is Clausius' heat-death.

Finally, in 1877, the American physicist Willard Gibbs contributed his theory of phase equilibrium to the field of thermodynamics, a theory which confirmed and broadened Clausius' findings relating to isolated systems wherein the heat is constant. Gibbs subsequently propounded the Phase Rule, and his great achievement was to define mathematically the varying conditions of temperature, pressure and concentration of the components of a system at which states of equilibrium would exist. In positing his theory, Gibbs found another function, called the thermodynamic potential, which, when it reached a minimum, also indicated equilibrium in an isolated heat engine.¹³ Thus, thermodynamicists found they could determine conditions of equilibrium either by Clausius' maximum entropy or by Gibbs' minimum thermodynamic potential.

With such a body of information shown to apply to closed systems of differing natures, it naturally followed that it could as easily, by extension, be fully applicable to another seemingly closed system--the universe. Such thinking was to have a great impact on the philosophical and religious thought of the nineteenth century.

Relying heavily on the theories of Clausius and Kelvin, physicists and scientifically-minded philosophers

¹³Dampier, p. 493.

came to believe that energy in the cosmos was wasting into heat by friction and that energy would increasingly become more dissipated and less available as temperature differences were reduced. Believing that the amount of energy in the universe was both limited and constant, they foresaw a time in the future when all the universe's energy would be converted into heat which would, in turn, come to be uniformly distributed through matter in mechanical equilibrium. With the entropical process being irreversible, the universe would have to become inert, with no possibility for further change.

As held true in isolated heat systems, the process of nature's deterioration was seen to be irreversible, for, as Dampier insists, "in the second law of thermodynamics and the irreversible rise of entropy of an isolated system towards a maximum, we have a physical process which can proceed in one direction. The random scattering of molecules by their mutual collisions can only lead them to approach the distribution velocities given by the law of error. . . . this process of shuffling can only be reversed by a reversal of time itself. . . . The second law of thermodynamics, the principle of the increase in entropy, describes the one, all important process of nature."¹⁴ Having seen their supplies of energy by which man lives becoming

¹⁴A History of Science, p. 424.

progressively more scarce, nineteenth century thinkers proclaimed the inevitability of Clausius' famous heat-death. The earth and, by extended logic, the sun and stars would have an end.¹⁵

Quickly adopted by the more pessimistic nineteenth century philosophers, who were already espousing a mechanistic, materialistic world, the laws of thermodynamics and the theory of the inevitable heat-death offered fuel for an atheism-determinism fire. Thermodynamics threw doubt on the prevailing theory of biological vitalism, which, as defined by William Dampier, held that "in living beings there exists a vital force, which controls or even suspends physical and chemical laws, adapts the organism to its environment, and shapes its ends."¹⁶ Applying thermodynamical principles to living as well as dead systems, it was assumed that animals and humans were like machines; they could retain motion and do work only if supplied with energy in the form of food, water and air. Almost a century later, humanistic philosophers were to add information/communication to this list of essentials. All in all, the formulation of the

¹⁵Such beliefs were not then entirely founded on fact, as some later physicists were to assert. The inevitability of the heat-death rested on the assumptions that what is true in very limited circumstances also holds true in much larger systems; that the universe is a completely closed system into which no energy enters; and that individual molecules cannot be separated into fast and slow-moving groups. The forthcoming Demon would be an attempt to do such sorting work.

¹⁶A History of Science, p. 320.

field of thermodynamics had inspired a pessimistic school of thought. It was James Clerk Maxwell who offered a bit of optimism and a possible escape from the approaching death of the world in the form of Maxwell's Demon.

Maxwell, who had been a noted contributor to scientific investigations concerning the kinetic theory of gases, spectrum analysis and electric currents, set forth an idea that was to arouse a century-long controversy. In 1871, in the chapter "Limitation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics" at the end of his book, Theory of Heat, Maxwell introduced his soon-to-be notorious Demon. He wrote:

One of the best established facts in thermodynamics is that it is impossible in a system enclosed in an envelope which permits neither change of volume nor passage of heat, and in which both the temperature and the pressure are everywhere the same, to produce any inequality of temperature or of pressure without the expenditure of work. This is the second law of thermodynamics, and it is undoubtedly true as long as we can deal with bodies only in mass, and have no power of perceiving or handling the separate molecules of which they are made up. But if we conceive a being whose faculties are so sharpened that he can follow every molecule in its course, such a being, whose attributes are still as essentially finite as our own, would be able to do what is at present impossible to us. For we have seen that the molecules in a vessel full of air at uniform temperature are moving with velocities by no means uniform, though the mean velocity of any great number of them, arbitrarily selected, is almost exactly uniform. Now let us suppose that such a vessel is divided into two portions, A and B, by a division in which there is a small hole, and that a being, who can see the individual molecules, opens and

closes this hole, so as to allow only the swifter molecules to pass from A to B, and only the slower ones to pass from B to A. He will thus, without expenditure of work, raise the temperature of B and lower that of A, in contradiction to the second law of thermodynamics.¹⁷

Maxwell thus offered a hypothetical, minute being--soon to be called the Demon--who had faculties sharp enough to follow individual molecules. Posted at a frictionless, sliding door in a wall separating two compartments of a box filled with gas, this being, when a fast-moving molecule moved from compartment A towards B, would open the door and let the molecule pass. If a slow-moving molecule approached from A towards B, he would close the door, thereby trapping the slow-mover in A. Thus, after a time of such sorting, all the fast-moving molecules would be in section B, while all the slow ones would remain in A. The gas in A would grow cold, while that in B would grow hot. Thus, Maxwell believed, the Demon could reconcentrate diffused energy by sorting molecules. Maxwell's Demon, if it were truly workable, could create a perpetual motion machine which would function due to the temperature difference in the two compartments of the box by continuously shifting molecules from section to section. With this hypothetical device, Maxwell offered a spark of hope to those discomfited by the negative philosophy of the nineteenth century. By hard work and

¹⁷Ehrenberg, p. 103.

conscious sorting, a successful Demon could confound the second law of thermodynamics.

Maxwell's positive, although vaguely delineated, idea was immediately subjected to study by others. In the 1870's, Lord Kelvin attempted to establish the characteristics necessary for a Demon and concluded that it should have the qualities of atomic dimensions, animation and intelligence.¹⁸ Following Kelvin, Erwin Schrödinger pointed out that "although it is remarkable . . . that living bodies, far from increasing their entropy, in fact decrease it, organizing more and more matter in their own pattern, this decrease is more than balanced by the trail of increased entropy they create in their surroundings. Thus, animate agencies as such are subject to the second law."¹⁹ An animated Demon, he concluded, could not successfully create a perpetual motion machine.

Fortunately for Demon enthusiasts, the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth saw the second law of thermodynamics fall into disrepute. Some physicists believed the second law to be valid only in certain circumstances, as in very small, isolated systems. Also, the success of electron physics

¹⁸Ehrenberg, p. 105.

¹⁹Ehrenberg, p. 106.

and documented evidence of Brownian fluctuations²⁰ further encouraged those who sought to disprove the second law.

In 1913, Polish physicist M. Smoluchowski attacked the problem from the angle of probabilities. Discarding Boltzmann's well-known theory of most-probable states, he adopted instead his least-probable state aspect, which stated that entropy could also be associated with improbable states or corresponding fluctuations in a thermodynamic system. Smoluchowski cited instances in which such fluctuations are easily observable and the rate of their occurrence ascertainable, large ones being rare but small ones being very common. Although observation of a large fluctuation would require an incredible length of time if the observer's focus were, for example, the universe, small but observable fluctuations do occur often in our system; a sorting Demon would not have to operate on single molecules. Although discarding the idea of an automated Demon, Smoluchowski conceded that an intelligent being could operate a perpetual motion machine by pushing a weightless support under such elevated particles if he were continuously informed about the particles and able to operate devices which do not involve an exchange of energy.²¹ This being could not, however, be

²⁰Direct evidence of the action of molecules was obtained by Robert Brown in 1827, when he observed, under a microscope, irregular movements of very small particles; thus the term "Brownian fluctuations" or "Brownian movements" (Dampier, p. 253).

²¹Ehrenberg, p. 107.

a human, who cannot perform work without increasing entropy.

Taking off from Smoluchowski, Leo Szilard published an article in 1929 entitled "On the Reduction of Entropy of a Thermodynamic System Caused by Intelligent Beings," in which he stated that the intelligence needed by the Demon was a sort of memory. The Demon would gather information, such as velocity and location, about particles and record the findings in the "notebook" of his memory for further use. Szilard postulated that by using his memory, the Demon could continuously reduce entropy, unless the processes of gathering information and recording produced entropy. As recounted by Ehrenberg, Szilard concluded his theory by stating: "If we are not willing to admit that the second law is violated, we have to conclude that the action which . . . establishes the 'memory'--is indissolubly linked with production of entropy."²² Although Szilard's Demon could temporarily reduce entropy in certain sections, it could not actually reduce the net entropy of a system; he had neither proven nor disproven the possibility of a successful Demon. Rather, Szilard's theory led to the opening of an entirely new field, that of the relationship of entropy to information theory.

Providing the final important link in the chain of Demon theorists is Leon Brillouin, who, in 1951, published

²²"Maxwell's Demon," p. 109.

"Maxwell's Demon Cannot Operate." Brillouin argued:

Before an intelligent being can use its intelligence, it must perceive its objects, and that requires physical means of perception. Visual perception in particular requires the illumination of the object. Seeing is essentially a nonequilibrium phenomenon. The cylinder in which the demon operates is, optically speaking, a closed black body and . . . the radiation inside a black body is homogeneous and non-directional because for any wavelength and any temperature the emissivity of any surface equals its coefficient of absorption. Hence, although an observer inside a black body is exposed to a quanta of radiation, he can never tell whether a particular photon comes from the molecule or is reflected from a wall. The observer must use a lamp that emits light of a wavelength not well represented in the black-body radiation, and the eventual absorption of this light by the observer or elsewhere increases the entropy of the system.²³

Brillouin then showed the increase of entropy effected by perception would offset any decrease the Demon could produce by a much greater amount. His conclusions eliminated the need for an intelligent being, since the Demon didn't need intelligence but the physical means of illumination provided from outside the system in order to obtain information. Maxwell had overlooked the fact that his Demon would be blind, and the introduction of light into the box would more than cancel any sorting the Demon could effect.

Brillouin's arguments, for all practical purposes, spelled nemesis for Maxwell's Demon and its promise of confutation of the second law of thermodynamics. The universe

²³Ehrenberg, p. 109.

would face the heat-death in spite of scientific attempts to devise a method of escape.²⁴ However, Brillouin's premises, and Szilard's before him, threw open the doors to the new and dynamic field of information theory, which is also of great concern to Thomas Pynchon.

By means of Szilard's experiments in 1929 and further investigations in the 1930's, it was discovered that entropy applies not only to heat systems but to communication systems as well. As John Nefastis tells Oedipa Maas: "'The equation for one, back in the 30's, had looked very like the equation for the other. It was a coincidence'" (Crying, 77). Oddly enough, the equations are identical. Boltzmann indicated that the formula for the amount of entropy in a heat system, where H indicates the amount of entropy, and K is an arbitrary constant, is: $H = -K \sum_i p_i \log p_i$. Nineteenth century physicists apparently saw the connection but did not develop a quantitative theory; that was accomplished in 1949 by Claude E. Shannon of Bell Telephone Laboratories.

²⁴Recent findings leave the fate of the universe unchanged. It is now known that active matter passes into radiation which will be dissipated through a space too vast to become saturated with radiation, which would allow it to form matter again; the universe is now thought to be passing into an equilibrium in which radiation is evenly distributed. The only hope for salvation seems to lie in the possibility, given the fact of infinite time, that an incredibly implausible event should occur, a freak accident of nature--chance concentrations of molecules reversing the entropical process or chance concentrations of radiant energy saturating a new part of space and forming new matter (Dampier, pp. 482-83).

Shannon, reputed to be the founder of information theory, discovered that the equation for average information is derived largely from probability theory, with entropy subjecting communication to the same principle as heat engines. Shannon's equation for average information/symbol, or the signal-to-noise ratio was: $H = -K \sum_i p_i \log p_i$.²⁵ The equation, identical to Boltzmann's formula established the century before, indicated that quantities of information are related to entropy, or measures of disorder. Shannon's discovery led to the founding of the very complex field of information theory. For purposes of this paper, a brief and elementary examination of basic terms and a few of the many important premises will suffice.

According to information theorists, an amount of information is a measure of the degree of order associated with any given message. A measure of information is a measure of order; it is a capacity for conveying meaning. On the other hand, an amount of entropy in communication is a measure of disorder; it indicates the measure of randomness and uncertainty which destroys the capacity for meaning. Just as heat systems automatically and irreversibly acquire entropy, it is the first law of information theory that a message can lose order spontaneously through

²⁵Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, The Mathematical Theory of Communication (1949; rpt. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 50.

the act of transmission, but it can never gain it.

Of the many aspects of information theory, Pynchon is most concerned with this principle of the destruction of information through transmission, or the act of communication. In order to explore this phenomenon, further definitions are required. The following statements by Lila Gatlin define relevant terms: "A source or transmitter is any apparatus that emits a sequence of symbols. . . . when this sequence of symbols is ordered according to a set of constraints, the set of constraints constitutes a language and the sequence of symbols itself is called a message. The encoding of the message in a particular language occurs at the source. A channel is simply any medium over which the message is transmitted."²⁶ Information is destroyed during the act of communication chiefly by the presence of noise, which is, technically, "any malfunction of the transmission mechanics which causes error in the message received."²⁷ It must be noted, however, that Pynchon expands the definition to include anything which interferes with the transmission process, anything which distorts the encoded message.

The best illustration of noise's destruction of information is an example of two persons speaking over a

²⁶Information Theory and the Living System, pp. 96-97.

²⁷Gatlin, p. 97.

telephone and experiencing a bad connection. Because of line noise, which cannot be avoided even in a good connection due to the nature of the electrons which carry the current, the person at the receiving end may not be able to understand words or sentences spoken by the caller; piecing together bits of the intended message, the receiver may pick up only parts of the caller's message, or he or she may miss it altogether. Noise, in this instance, distorts or destroys the intended message.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to completely eliminate noise in any real system. Further, much of the information a person receives at any time has gone through several stages of transmission, each stage implying an accompanying loss of meaning. Norbert Weiner states that "the process of transmitting information may involve several consecutive stages of transmission following one another in addition to the final or effective stage; and between any two of these there will be an act of translation, capable of dissipating information. This fact, that information may be dissipated but not gained, is the cybernetic form of the second law of thermodynamics."²⁸

An illustration of the progressive destruction of information as it passes through consecutive stages can be

²⁸Norbert Weiner, The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society (Boston: Foughton Mifflin Co., 1950), p. 88.

found in the children's game of "Telephone." In this game, a starter whispers a message to the person next in line who, in turn, transmits it to the next and so on. The high-point of the game occurs when the last person in line reveals the message he or she has received. Generally, the message received at the end bears little or no resemblance to the one sent by the starter. Noise factors which contribute to the destruction of information contained in the original message are the inability to hear adequately due to the requirement of whispering, laughter and the usage of words not in a receiver's vocabulary.

Other noise factors which distort meaning in a message occur frequently in the human communication process. If the words encoded at the source are not those within the vocabulary of the receiver, the meaning of the message, no matter how carefully transmitted, will be lost. As every channel has a rate appropriate for transmission, if the source emits symbols faster than the channel can transmit, chaos will result.²⁹ Similarly, if a sender speaks at a rate greater than a listener can assimilate, the message will mean nothing. Further, the ear and the brain have an effective frequency cut-off which prevents the reception of certain high frequencies which can be transmitted over the

²⁹Gatlin, p. 98.

telephone.³⁰ If a speaker transmits at these frequencies, information gained by the receiver will be negligible.

If the commonplaces of imprecision and irrelevancy are added to this list, possible noise factors seem to pose insurmountable obstacles to communication. According to Shannon's famous second theorem, it is impossible to eliminate noise completely in the process of communication. However, under very prescribed conditions, it is possible to transmit messages with minimal loss of meaning. Unfortunately, such messages are so simple and repetitive that only a small amount of actual information can be conveyed.

Entropy in communication, as has been stated, is a measure of disorder, of randomness and uncertainty. Lila Gatlin states that a message high in entropy contains some or all of the following characteristics: message variety; large vocabulary; surprisal value; and unexpectedness.³¹ A high-entropy message, with its greater variety, entails the element of uncertainty which, in turn, implies a high probability of error. A message can be so liable to transmission error due to these four factors or to other types of noise previously discussed that information is destroyed. On the other hand, a message low in entropy--one which lacks surprise, variety, unexpectedness or a large

³⁰Weiner, p. 89.

³¹Information Theory and the Living System, p. 49.

vocabulary--has a greater chance for accurate reception; transmission of a low-entropy message can be highly reliable in spite of noise interference.

However, a low-entropy message contains a minimum of information. In order to gain the element of certainty, the element of variety must be sacrificed, and when there is little variety in a message, little can be said. As Lila Gatlin states, "one of them, variety, is ultimately amplified by increasing the entropy while the other, reliability, is ultimately amplified by decreasing the entropy."³² A typical example of a low-variety, low-surprise and low-vocabulary level message is a factory-printed special occasion card. Such a card conveys merely conventional sentiments in the simplest way in order to appeal to the widest possible range of people. Although the message may be composed of many words, such an extremely probable message conveys a small amount of actual meaning; simultaneously, it is relatively free of entropy.

In addition to reducing variety, repetition can be employed to eliminate disorder and to insure accuracy of reception. Repetitive redundancy, such as a short sequence of symbols repeated within longer sequences, can aid in avoiding ambiguity and in combatting error. Although this method insures a more accurate reception, it also demands

³²Information Theory and the Living System, p. 99.

that a message be simple and relatively meaningless.

The second variety of redundancy in language, informational redundancy, cannot be avoided. Informational redundancy, which Gatlin defines as the "direct measure of all rules which define error in a language,"³³ is inherent in English due to grammatical rules, word ordering and semantic constraints. This type of redundancy automatically reduces the amount of meaning which can be transmitted. Claude Shannon states: "The redundancy of ordinary English, not considering statistical structure over greater distances than about eight letters, is roughly 50%. This means that when we write English, half of what we write is determined by the structure of the language, and half is chosen freely."³⁴ The English language has inherently such a high degree of informational redundancy that oftentimes as much as 75% of the words in a sentence can be eliminated as being unnecessary to the real meaning. If informational redundancy helps combat reception error, it also limits the amount and intensity of information conveyed in any sentence.

Summarily, the concept of entropy applies to communication and the transfer of information as indiscriminately as to heat systems. Destroying variety and order in one as

³³Information Theory and the Living System, p. 70.

³⁴The Mathematical Theory of Communication, p. 56.

easily as in the other, it denotes a state of irreversible chaos. As entropy sets in, both will tend toward meaninglessness. These ramifications of the second law of thermodynamics have fascinated literary figures almost as much as they have troubled scientists and communication specialists.

Of all the American writers to incorporate the scientific principles of thermodynamics into their works, until the time of Thomas Pynchon none is as prominent as Henry Adams (1838-1918). Although the field of information theory was unknown to him, the thermodynamic laws which applied to closed systems captured his imagination and became his obsession. Certain that the laws of physics pertained to all systems, he became famous for his application of the concept of entropy to the world in which he lived. A hard-core cynic and pessimist, Henry Adams revealed through his literary works a random, chaotic American society deteriorating by degrees, dying slowly as a result of the second law of thermodynamics. His vision of the entropic society is crucial to an understanding of Pynchon's works as a whole but most especially to V., where the Lady of shifting identities represents Adams' Virgin-turned-Dynamo.

A descendent of two presidents, Henry Adams was born in Boston in 1838. After graduation from Harvard and attendance at the University of Berlin, he returned to the United States to become secretary to his father, then a

congressman in Washington. From 1861 to 1868 Adams lived in London and again served as private secretary to his father, who had been appointed United States Minister to England. In 1870 he returned to America to become assistant professor of history at Harvard, serving as editor of the North American Review until 1877, when he retired from teaching, moved to Washington and began his writing and historical research, making frequent trips to Europe.

Although his nine-volume history of the United States, spanning the years 1801-17, became definitive texts and established him as a leading American historian, Adams is best remembered for Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, a unique perspective on thirteenth century Europe and a reaction, in part, to industrialism, Darwinism and scientific progress, and The Education of Henry Adams, a self-conscious, historically-oriented autobiography. Of the numerous books, poems, essays and articles written by Adams, Thomas Pynchon draws heavily from those which may be said to comprise his despairing, entropic vision. Forming a unified and sustained picture of pessimism and prophesying a coming doom for America are, in addition to The Education, "The Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres," "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" and A Letter to American Teachers of History.

Having determined in young manhood that the history of America would prove itself a complete failure and total

disgrace, Adams, as he grew into middle and old age, saw rapidly-increasing symptoms of a dying society. The near-misanthrope was revolted by his country, which was destined to achieve greatness but was instead rushing headlong to ruin. In the historian-scholar's eyes, democracy was a sham, largely because it deified competition and rewarded self-interest and greed. Governmental idiocy revealed itself in the dominance of the great moneyed and propertied interests, universal education, old age pensions and trade unions. Capitalism created only decadence, and Americans, with a get-money-by-any-means philosophy, were materialistic and competitively cruel. Economic and political power had passed from the hands of the educated to the hands of the unschooled. The family unit was dissolving, crime and violence increased yearly, while culture and the arts had become nearly extinct. Science was god and had created the "Iron City" of America, while education was ineffectual and incapable of instilling a sense of self-respect and purpose in life. Americans were petty and, when not blatantly immoral, at best amoral.

In short, Adams claimed that the entire history of America, its essence an accumulation of failure, made him so physically ill that only by self-compulsion could he read its dreary details.³⁵ Believing that the age in which

³⁵ Ernest Samuels, Henry Adams: The Major Phase (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 457.

he was condemned to live could offer no glory, heroism, idealism or hope, he could foresee nothing but imminent collapse for his civilization. Writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Adams' consuming despair and cynicism were revealed in his works in two major ways--in the symbolism of the Virgin and the Dynamo and in the thermodynamical concept of entropy as applied to society.

According to Adams, the Virgin and the Dynamo were the two greatest forces on the mind of man since the beginning of time. The Virgin, denoting spirituality, beauty and unity and manifesting her highest powers in medieval Europe, was an energy of imagination, creation and salvation. The Dynamo, an embodiment of the powerful industrial and technological energies which were unleashed and which shattered existence in 1900, denoted multiplicity, chaos and destruction. Adams was convinced that, with the advent of the electric motor, man had created his own assassin. At the very least, the mechanical energy produced by the Dynamo served to weaken man's physical and intellectual energies and to induce a mechanical uniformity of mind Adams found prevalent in rural, agricultural communities and in urban, industrial areas. He maintained that "every gain of power,--from gunpowder to steam,--from the dynamo to the Daimler motor,--has been made at the cost of man's,--and of woman's--vitality" (Letter, 167).

At most, and most probable, the mechanical energies of the Dynamo would enable man to blow himself and his world to bits.

Further, man and society were doubly-doomed. The second law of thermodynamics, which Adams borrowed from nineteenth century physicists and remodeled to suit his own purposes, served as explanation for the physical, cultural, moral and intellectual decline he evidenced in his society. Once acquainted with the laws of thermodynamics, Adams observed every aspect of his age in terms of entropy. He became so convinced that America was deteriorating in the grips of the entropical process that he crusaded to shatter the historical optimism and evolutionary complacency rampant among professors of history. As the physical sciences had come to dominate higher education and to teach the universality of thermodynamical law on a nationwide scale, Adams believed it folly that historians denied its applicability to man and society. Through his writings, he attempted to bring history in line with physics and to make it relevant to a dying world. Repeatedly Adams called for the reform of university education and the recruitment of a moral and intellectual elite comprised of the historian-physicist which could, if enough time remained, postpone the inevitable heat-death.

Having spent much of his adult life in Europe, Adams had cultivated a deep love for the Virgin Mary who, in her

earliest manifestations, had appeared as Venus. For him, the two were synonymous. The Virgin's attraction, which first revealed itself in the pages of Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, was irresistible and incomprehensible. Retrospectively scanning the pages of history, Adams postulated that she had served as the greatest symbol of power since the beginning of time. In her name, thousands had gone to death and martyrdom; in her name, man's most beautiful artwork and sculpture had been created; in her name, the most awesome and magnificent buildings in the world had been constructed. In chapter 25 of The Education, Adams wrote: "Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done."³⁶

The Virgin's spiritual impulse infused the religion, philosophy, economics and artwork of the Middle Ages, and through her, all the contradictions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were reconciled. A myth of unity, her miracles represented the tremendous extent of her power over the imagination, she herself symbolizing, according to Ernest Samuels, "the disinterested quest for Beauty, the restoration of poetry and art to daily life and the recovery

³⁶ Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, ed. Ernest Samuels (1918; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), pp. 388-89. Hereafter cited as Educ..

of compassion."³⁷ With the love of her legends, the universality of her cult and countless shrines testifying to her extraordinary, centuries-long hold over the mind of man, Henry Adams saw in the Virgin the only hope for mankind.

At the Paris Exposition in 1900, he encountered the Virgin's counterpart. Standing in the Great Hall of Dynamos, Adams discovered in the Dynamo an equally immense and powerful attraction. The antithesis of the power of the imagination, the Dynamo represented the awesome force of reason, a force simultaneously appalling and exciting. Facing the mammoth engines, Adams sensed that inherent in the Dynamo was power which escaped the bounds of his imagination as well as the limits of his knowledge. Here, too, was force unfathomable and irresistible. Speaking in the third-person style characteristic of his autobiography, Adams wrote: ". . . to Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. . . . he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross. The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel, revolving within arms length at some vertiginous speed . . . Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force" (Educ., 380). But if the force of the Dynamo was absolute, it was terrifying.

³⁷Henry Adams, p. 229.

It was unknowable, anarchical and uncontrollable.

To Henry Adams, the Dynamo was also characteristically American and symbolized perfectly the failure of the country he loathed. Having long searched for a symbol to represent the chaotic and destructive, materialistic, science-dominated energies he evidenced and abhorred in America, he found it at the Paris Exposition in the form of the Dynamo; Samuels explains that "the hideous anonymity of its power aptly suggested the dehumanizing tendencies of the new industrial and scientific society."³⁸ Recognizing the absolute polarity of the Virgin and the Dynamo, Adams believed he had discovered in the two extremes the greatest forces over the mind of man since time immemorial. They were "two kingdoms of force which had nothing in common but attraction" (Educ., 383). The Virgin symbolized life and beauty, the Dynamo degradation and death. America had willfully denied one and elevated the other, and in the rejection of the Lady, Adams saw clear signs of impending doom for the United States.

Reflecting on the two ultimate forms of energy, Adams sensed that in Europe "the Virgin was still felt . . . and seemed to be as potent as X-Rays;" such was not the case for his mother country, for "in America neither Venus nor Virgin ever had value as force--at most as sentiment.

³⁸Henry Adams, p. 230.

No American had ever been truly afraid of either" (Educ., 383). That fact in itself bewildered the historian for whom the Virgin "was the highest energy ever known to man, the creator of four-fifths of his noblest art, exercising vastly more attraction over the human mind than all the steam-engines and dynamos ever dreamed of; and yet this energy was unknown to the American mind. An American Virgin would never dare command; an American Venus would never dare exist" (Educ. 385). Life-denying science, not the Virgin, ruled in America, and science would destroy the country.

In 1908, Adams wrote "The Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres," a prophetic poem which captured his despair over the desperate direction in which his country was heading. European man's devotion to the Lady, be she Venus or Virgin, had inspired magnificence. After his migration, American man founded a country which flourished and promised a greatness never before witnessed in the history of the world. But, having acquired an overweening sense of pride, American man believed ultimate success could only be achieved through the mysteries of science and so experimented, produced and created until the Dynamo came into being. If the machine satisfied his warped sense of pride, it also began to unleash economic, political and social energies which caused chaos. Furious to remedy the disorder, American man sought to bring to his land some bit of grace and beauty, but that possibility lay only with the

Virgin, who was nowhere to be found.

Having erected the Dynamo, America was compelled to subdue the god or be mastered by it, and the passing years revealed that its force was too great to be controlled. Grown to full potential, the Dynamo was invincible, and America was reduced to futile attempts to combat what it had invented. The end of "The Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres" reveals American man, the "Atom-King," uttering a blasphemous prayer to his mechanical god while rushing headlong to his slaughter, sacrificed to his own creation; only the poet returns to the Virgin, abandoning the intellectual, suicidal quest for a reconciliation with the force of life and instinct.

From the year 1900 until his death, Adams continued his bitter invectives against his country's obsession with the machine. Convinced that man had mounted science only to find himself run away with, he issued a prediction which would soon seem to be coming true; with his characteristic pessimism, he stated of his countrymen and those nations, especially Germany, which also worshipped the machine: "The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control . . . and the human race will commit suicide by blowing up the world."³⁹ Henry Adams' "Prayer" forewarns that the "Atom-King" will destroy himself through his foolhardy devotion to the Dynamo. Thomas

³⁹Samuels, p. 234.

Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow shows the fulfillment of that prophecy; the novel could easily serve as sequel to the poem. For both, the Dynamo symbolizes the colossal failure of man. His imagination atrophied and his response to beauty ignored, modern man has willfully designed his own path to destruction. If the Virgin symbolized all he could have been, the Dynamo represented all he had become. It was a failure and a sin for which Henry Adams, and Thomas Pynchon after him, would never forgive American society.

As he continued to observe events in his country, Adams became more and more certain that, just as the machine would be the end of man, American universities, the departments of history in particular, would have to make themselves relevant to the facts of existence. He had addressed himself to these points in The Education and in his poem to the Virgin, but perhaps, he thought, his views had been expressed too personally. He needed proof; he needed facts to substantiate his position. Thus, late in 1908, Adams wrote an essay entitled "The Rule of Phase Applied to History." In the form of a personal letter intended as an accompaniment to The Education, it was to have been distributed to each professor who received a copy of the book. It was, however, suppressed by his brother, Brooks, until 1919, when it appeared in a revised and condensed form.

In "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," an

expanded summing-up of his earlier views, Adams attempted to apply Willard Gibbs' principles of mathematics and physics to his own observations of society. Derived from the mathematician's short chapter, "On Existent Phases of Matter," published in his paper, Equilibrium of Heterogeneous Substances, the essay was overtly another proposal for university reform and a plea to imbue the teaching of history with currency and relevancy to the laws of physics. In a letter to his brother, Adams stated of "The Rule of Phase" that his newest effort "to reduce universals to one general formula of physics is the only natural and appropriate mode of University education which connects closely with the theory and practice of the middle ages; it is a return to first principles."⁴⁰

Even more than introducing a readily applicable teaching formula for history professors, however, "The Rule" was a distorted attempt to impose thermodynamical principles on mental and social development and to prove, via Willard Gibbs, that modern science and technological invention were outstripping the powers of man's control. Denouncing "usury" capitalism and citing examples which testified to the enormous acceleration of material production and the insanity of a materialistic culture, Adams again demanded a recruitment of a moral and intellectual elite, which alone could save man from himself. The

⁴⁰Samuels, p. 437.

primary task of that physicist-historian intelligentsia would be to revolutionize education by demanding that history be taught as a product of scientific law.

In "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," Adams essayed to chart mathematically the development and progress of man's thought throughout history, defining thought itself as a vapor with two degrees of freedom--attraction and acceleration. He postulated that "what he [Gibbs] conceded to motion in its phase as matter, he must concede to motion in its form as mind,"⁴¹ and concluded that "Thought is a historical substance, analogous to an electric current, which has obeyed the laws . . . of Phase" (Rule, 283). Thus, through a subtle but serious misapplication of Gibbs' law, Adams charted man's progress in terms of an energy system which evolved via a series of hierarchical phases. The Renaissance, it seemed, was the logical point from which to project the curve backward and forward.

The years before 1600, when the western world showed a steady progression forward, comprised what Adams termed the Religious Phase. With the condemnation of Galileo in 1633, the rising curve of energy underwent a 45 degree deflection, and man entered into the Mechanical Phase, the track of thought being dominated by Newton's

⁴¹Henry Adams, "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," in The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma (1919; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1949), p. 278. Hereafter cited as Rule.

theory of gravitation. This second phase came to a high point of acceleration in the use of steam and explosives; the peak was reached in 1830 with the advent of steam transport and in 1840 even more violently with the first use of electricity.

The discovery of electricity and radiation caused the curve to change again, for "Faraday, Clerk Maxwell, Hertz, Helmholtz, and the whole electro-magnetic school, thought in terms quite unintelligible to the old chemists and mechanists" (Rule, 306). The greatest determining factor, however, was the introduction of the detested Dynamo in 1870. So powerful and attractive did this force grow that around 1900 man was propelled violently into the Electrical Phase.

According to Adams, man had launched his undoing in this third phase; he had unleashed scientific energies and forces of nature with which his own thought could not keep pace. No longer in control, man would find his intellect outstripped by his inventions. The doomsaying Adams concluded his essay by predicting, via mathematical calculation, that circa 1921 man's thought would be brought to the limits of its possibilities. He summarized: "Supposing the Mechanical Phase to have lasted 300 years, from 1600 to 1900, the next or Electrical Phase would have a life equal to $\sqrt{300}$, or about seventeen years and a half, when--that is, in 1917--it would pass into another or Ethereal Phase,

which, for half a century, science has been promising, and which would last only $\sqrt{17.5}$, or about four years, and bring Thought to the limit of its possibilities in the year 1921. It may well be!" (Rule, 308).

Defeated by scientific creations, man's intellectual energy would succumb in 1921. When, in 1909, Henry Adams broadened his knowledge of physics and plunged into the laws of thermodynamics, he finally found the theory and the word which encapsulated his views. For him, nothing was more obvious or more certain than the rapid approach of the heat-death.

Before 1909, Adams had only a surface acquaintance with the laws of thermodynamics; although coached by astute friends, especially Clarence King and Arnold Hague, geologists who had done extensive research in the field, the underlying principles escaped Adams, who nonetheless gave thermodynamics his absolute adherence. However, when he stumbled upon Andrew Gray's recently-published book on Lord Kelvin, as clarified by Willard Gibbs, he suddenly discovered in the concept of entropy a philosophy directly relevant to his own fatalistic theory of history. With Kelvin as guide, the historian immersed himself in thermodynamical research and adapted his findings to his own vision of society, convinced that the social sciences could no longer deny the application of the second law on a human scale. The result of his introduction to Kelvin and his

thermodynamical enlightenment was A Letter to American Teachers of History.

That history and sociology professors continued to preach Darwinian elevation aroused Adams' ire since, as Ernest Samuels states, newly-indoctrinated into thermodynamics, he was assured that "Darwinian evolution conceived as a process of the progressive improvement of man both physically and mentally was as much of a delusion as all other theories of progress. Degradation and not elevation was the law of life as it was of the cosmos."⁴² While the physicist insisted--and to Adams' satisfaction had proven--that the law of dissipation applied indiscriminately to all systems, the historian remained a Vitalist, maintaining that man's energy, termed vital energy, was independent of mechanical law and that social energy was governed by laws of its own. The historian was an incurable optimist who cited an ever-rising standard of living, a growing national prestige and power and a tremendous industrial and scientific advancement as proof of man's progression. Such optimism and reasoning nauseated Adams, who fully intended to shatter all Darwinian-based delusions and to reveal man and society for what they were--closed and dying systems.

Adams set as his task that of revealing to his colleagues that "the law of Entropy applies to all vital processes even more rigidly than to mechanical" (Letter, 25)

⁴²Henry Adams, p. 478.

and of proving "the steady and fated enfeeblement and extinction of all nature's energies" (Letter, 30). In 1910, he distributed about two hundred-fifty copies of his Letter to history professors across the nation, announcing with typical sardonic modesty that the work was "about a hundred pages of no consequence . . . announcing the end of the universe, as predicted by Lord Kelvin, whom I now rather incline to put at the head of our time."⁴³ The book takes the form of an extended dialogue between the degradationists and elevationists or thermodynamical physicists and Darwinian evolutionists; as is to be expected, the victor of the debate is never in doubt.

Compiling and positing as truth bits of documentation which were no more than speculation, often taking facts completely out of context and subjecting scientific theory to deliberate misconstruction, Henry Adams pulled together a complete theory which "proved" the inevitable demise of all civilization. At the outset of A Letter, he established the approaching death of the physical universe.

From the scientist, Blandet, Adams extracted the diminution of the diameter of the sun and loss of solar heat as evidence of the sun's decline; from Lapparent, he culled the progressive loss of heat in the high latitudes to testify to the facts of terrestrial cooling and the

⁴³Samuels, pp. 470-71.

approach of another glacial era; from astronomers, he borrowed the disappearance of stars to attest to the demise of the solar system; and from Saporta's theory of lost vegetation, Adams cited that energy in vegetable growth had reached a climax in the carboniferous period, while animal growth had peaked in the miocene. For the historian, the facts that no new species had subsequently appeared, while many extinctions had occurred, coupled with the continuously dwindling size of animals, clearly testified to degradation.

Thus borrowing from the findings of various scientists, Adams inferred that "evolution of life on the earth had ceased to be progressive some millions of years ago, and had passed through its stationary period into regression before man ever appeared" (Letter, 66). With physicists, astronomers and paleontologists contributing theories which testified to the death of the universe, it remained for Adams to prove that man and society, as living systems of that universe, were equally subject to the second law of thermodynamics and also approaching the final equilibrium.

Relying heavily on unevaluated and sensational "facts" gleaned from newspapers, Adams proceeded to prove that American society as a whole was deteriorating. To support his premise of social decrepitude, he posited the following examples as conclusive evidence: a declining birth rate and rural population; a lowering of army standards; an increase in suicides; a prevalence of cancer, tuberculosis

and nervous exhaustion; an enfeebled American vitality; a rise in drug addiction and alcoholism; and a failure of eyesight among the young (Letter, 81-82). A rising crime rate attested to chaos, and economic crises and political corruption indicated decline. Adams said "society itself, at every national and municipal election, is seen physically trembling" (Letter, 184). And even more obvious than the deterioration of society was the deterioration of the individual man.

A major premise of A Letter is that man is not the highest possible creation, as the evolutionists so absolutely asserted. Setting aside Darwin's contention that man evolved from the ape, Adams picked up on the simultaneously-existing theory which traced human development back to an eocene lemur, which, he insisted in Swiftian overtones, "no one but a trained palaeontologist could distinguish from a hypothetical, primitive opossum, or weasel or squirrel or any other small form of what is commonly known as vermin" (Letter, 57). Adams said the human brain differs so extremely slightly from that of apes as to make man not superior to them but scarcely distinguishable, and any increase in his intellectual powers has been offset by a narrowing of his jaw, an early loss of hair and the inability of women to nurse their children.

Further, said Adams, anthropologists have proven that human teeth are the most primitive possessed by any

existing mammals, the molars, in fact, remaining unchanged from the molars of mammals living in the tertiary period. In addition to the fact that man's sense of smell is less acute than that of other mammals, the loss of twelve teeth over the years of his so-called "evolution" clearly testifies to regression. Citing these examples as concrete evidence of man's physical decay, Adams continued on with proof of his mental deterioration and set about to disprove the elevationists' most cherished belief--that thought or reason was the ultimate manifestation of his supremacy over lower animals and an indication of his steady evolution.

Drawing from various sources, Adams first maintained that human will is nothing more than an energy or mechanical attraction; thought, or motion of the mind, was said to be induced motion which followed the laws of electricity and, as such, had to be subject to the physical laws of thermodynamics. Further, he insisted that intelligence was nothing more than a degradation of instinct or intuition. Thought itself was mere atrophied physical action. Therefore, Adams concluded, it was ludicrous that historians should continue to praise man's reasoning faculty as an indication of supremacy or evolution; instead, he said, mankind should be ashamed of "this one-sided Consciousness,--this amputated Intelligence,--this degraded Act,--this truncated Will" (Letter, 111).

Accompanying the enfeeblement of man's mental faculties was, Adams witnessed, the demise of his creative powers, which had always been less than those evidenced in the apotheosis of butterflies, the flowerings of plants and the coloration of certain birds (Letter, 145). Clearly, nothing in recent history could rival the creations of the Egyptian pyramids, the tombs and temples of Berlin, the sculpture of Pheidias and Praxiteles, the writings of Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Pindar, Lucretius or Thucydides. The battle of the Ancients and the Moderns had long been decided, with the standards of excellence established by the Greeks and Romans, if not by the first Jews and the works in the Garden of Eden.

Since those ancient times, man's only noteworthy achievements appeared in the Middle Ages and were thereafter conspicuously absent. Adams wrote: "According to our western standards, the most intense phase of human Energy occurred in the form of religious and artistic emotion,--perhaps in the Crusades and Gothic Churches;--but since then, though vastly increased in apparent mass, human energy has lost intensity and continues to lose it with accelerated rapidity as the Church proves" (Letter, 154). As far as man's power as a creative, productive being was concerned, Adams could only conclude that "as a creative energy he inherited next to nothing. The coral polyp is a giant beside him. As an energy he has but one dominant function:--that

of accelerating the operation of the second law of thermodynamics" (Letter, 155). Not only was man subject to the laws of physics, but, of all the systems which had ever existed, he was the chief entropy-producing offender.

Beyond being a lesser conservationist of natural energies than the ocean, atmosphere, earth, minerals, metals and certain vegetables, man was a deliberate and dedicated waster of every form of energy he had ever discovered, from coal to forests to his own resources. Adams maintained: "From the physicist's point of view, Man, as a conscious and constant, single, natural force, seems to have no function except that of dissipating or degrading energy" (Letter, 131); he is, therefore, "a bottomless sink of waste unparalleled in the cosmos, and can already see the end of the immense economies which his mother Nature stored for his support" (Letter, 135). From every angle of observation, concluded the historian, it can be seen that man and his society comprise a bleak picture.

Believing he had thus documented the problem so thoroughly as to make it undeniable, Adams assumed he had proven beyond doubt that man and society, inescapably subject to the laws of physics, had, like the physical universe, undergone such a vast deterioration that both trembled on the threshold of the final equilibrium, the mere approach of which, because of the absolute absence of any form of energy exchange, would insure pervasive imbecility at the very

least and fatality at best. Of this inevitable final state, the historian said "the only absolute certainty in physics is that the earth every day approaches it" (Letter, 79). Believing such to be true, Adams insisted it was madness for historians to persist in ignoring the claims of the physicists, insanity for them to cling to Darwinian tenets.

In the concluding "Solutions" section of A Letter to American Teachers of History, Henry Adams reiterated his demand that historians bring themselves in line with the facts of existence and teach in accordance with scientific law. Since technological instruction had reached the point at which it had to insist on the universality of thermodynamics, historians, too, would have to become physicists of sorts and adopt laboratory methods. Having too long ignored the dilemma, universities would have to reconcile history and sociology with math and physics. A common understanding and formula would have to be found for dealing with this first principle of instruction. For whatever amount of time remained until the end was reached, the historian must desist from teaching what was known to be contrary to law; henceforward, said Adams, "the historian will have to define his profession as the science of human degradation" (Letter, 95).

Adams distributed the Letter among his colleagues, confident he had unquestionably proven that man and society stood at the end of the road intellectually, physically,

morally and culturally; the heat-death was at hand. But, if he expected to shatter inertia, to shock or incite reaction and controversy, he was gravely disappointed. The recipients of the Letter dismissed it; some rudely ignored it, others ridiculed it, while most could make no sense of it at all. In a short time it was forgotten. It did not shatter the historians' quiet disregard for the laws of thermodynamics and did not result in widespread conversion to belief in an entropy-doomed society.

With scorn and contempt for his peers, Adams reconciled himself to the futility of his efforts, stating that the work they dismissed had been "a scientific demonstration that Socialism, Collectivism, Humanitarianism, Universalism, Philanthropism, and every other ism has come, and is the End, and there is nothing possible beyond, and they can all go play, and on the whole, base-ball is best."⁴⁴ Thereafter, Adams gave up all attempts to gain converts to his thermodynamical views, refusing to allow A Letter to be republished and circulated to the public during his lifetime. An unwavering pessimist and malcontent, he entered into further literary projects, continuing his self-education and finally accepting as unshakeable the inertia rampant among university professors.

Only later generations recognized the depth and validity of Henry Adams' despair. His pessimistic works

⁴⁴Samuels, p. 489.

were seen to be prophetic of twentieth century history, which--after two major world wars and countless hostilities and international confrontations, incessant national crises and upheavals, nuclear bombings, mass murders and genocide, world-wide famine and poverty, repeated racial conflicts and political assassinations and recurring economic collapses--has deteriorated into widespread chaos. Later generations adopted Henry Adams' vision of societal entropy and made it their own. If his symbols of the Virgin and the Dynamo capsulized the failure of civilization, his concept of entropy represented its ultimate fate.

Henry Adams inherited his literary tools from nineteenth century physicists. When Thomas Pynchon wrote "Entropy," he, too, turned to the thermodynamicists--as interpreted by Henry Adams; the short story is the result of an acknowledged debt to both, Maxwell's Demon is a primary character in The Crying of Lot 49, and, as Harry B. Henderson states, "there is more than skepticism in V., in which Pynchon seems to be writing a novel in the spirit of Adams' controversial late essays."⁴⁵

⁴⁵Harry B. Henderson III, "Liberal Conscience and Apocalyptic Parody," in Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 278.

II

"Entropy" is set in Washington, D.C. and opens on a cold, rainy February day in 1957. The thermometer registers 37° Fahrenheit for the third consecutive day.

Beginning with an epigraph from Tropic of Cancer, in which Henry Miller speaks of societal decadence as an invariable weather condition,⁴⁶ Pynchon quickly draws a similar correlation by maintaining that "the soul (spiritus, ruach, pneuma) is nothing, substantially, but air; it is only natural that warpings in the atmosphere should be recapitulated in those who breathe it."⁴⁷ The unchangeable 37° atmospheric aberration signals the beginning of the final entropical state of thermodynamical equilibrium; the aimless, degenerate, intellectually and spiritually arid characters who populate the story are manifestations, in human form, of matter in the ultimate state of deterioration.

As the story begins, Meatball Mulligan's

⁴⁶Henry Miller's epigraph from Tropic of Cancer is: "Boris has just given me a summary of his views. He is a weather prophet. The weather will continue bad, he says. There will be more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere . . . We must get into step, a lock-step toward the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change."

⁴⁷Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy," Kenyon Review, 22 (1960), 278.

lease-breaking party enters its fortieth hour. Occupying the lower story of a two-level house, Meatball is playing host to a weird group of characters remarkably similar to the cast of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna." Sandor Rojas and his entourage are finding kicks in Heisdeck and benzedrine; Duke, Vincent, Krinkles and Paco, collectively titled the Duke di Angelis quartet, prefer to smoke marijuana; several female guests, in varying stages of drunkenness, are finding couches, chairs and sinks on which to pass out. As the party's noise level gains decibels, sounds of its disorder begin to seep into the upstairs apartment.

Entombed on the top flat of the house are fifty-four-year-old Callisto and his French-Annamese mistress, Aubade. Sealed off from the outside as hermetically as an isolated heat engine, their apartment is what Pynchon terms a "hothouse." The image of the hothouse will recur throughout his works. Counterpointing the Street, the arena of chaos, riot and the mindlessness of the mob, the hothouse denotes the past. Don Hausdorf defines it as follows: "This is the world of the private, isolated soul, insatiably amassing inanimate Things, whether of money, ritual, or memory. The Hothouse sense of time is one which recreates the past into its own narrow purposes by virtue of a fraudulent nostalgia."⁴⁸ As Tanner states, the hothouse is

⁴⁸"Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," p. 266.

"the realm of memory where the mind is sealed up in the secretions of its reveries over the past."⁴⁹ Physically and intellectually, Callisto lives in a hothouse of his own creation.

Complete with exotic flowers and tropical birds, Callisto's "Rousseau-like fantasy, this hothouse jungle" (Entropy, 279) is the culmination of seven years of work and is a totally-ordered universe within the confines of the apartment walls: "Through trial-and-error Callisto had perfected its ecological balance, with the help of the girl its artistic harmony, so that the swayings of its plant life, the stirrings of its birds and human inhabitants were all as integral as the rhythms of a perfectly-executed mobile. He and the girl could no longer, of course, be omitted from that sanctuary; they had become necessary to its unity" (Entropy, 279). Having everything they need delivered, Callisto and Aubade never leave their apartment and are completely shut off from the outside world. Having ventured to wall out the disorder of the Street, they exist in a smoothly-functioning universe which is "a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder" (Entropy, 279). Providing immunity from all contemporary occurrences, the hothouse is Callisto's attempt to arrest

⁴⁹City of Words, p. 166.

the passage of time and to thwart the unfurling of the historical process.

As Meatball's party rages below, Callisto wakes to check on a sick bird he has been cradling in his hands; for three days he has been attempting to transfer love and body heat from himself to the bird in order to save its life. A student of science, Callisto knows that as long as temperature inequalities exist, energy can be transferred from a hot to a cold body, and a system will continue to function in an orderly and healthy fashion. Noticing the lingering illness of the bird, he begins to grow apprehensive. He has been sheltering the creature for three days without success. The temperature outside has remained at 37° in spite of the fact the weather itself has changed from snow to rain. Callisto senses an ominous correlation between the two phenomena and remembers the writings of Henry Adams:

Henry Adams, three generations before his own, had stared aghast at Power; Callisto found himself now in much the same state over Thermodynamics, the inner life of that power, realizing like his predecessor that the Virgin and the dynamo stand as much for love as for power; that the two are indeed identical;⁵⁰ and that love therefore not only makes the world go 'round but also makes the boccie ball spin, the nebula precess. It was this latter or sidereal element which disturbed him. The cosmologists had predicted an eventual heat-death for the universe (something like Limbo:

⁵⁰Pynchon's real meaning here is not clear, for Adams states absolutely that the Virgin and the Dynamo represent a polarity of principles and are, in fact, "two kingdoms of force which [had] nothing in common but attraction" (Educ., 383).

form and motion abolished, heat-energy identical at every point in it); the meteorologists, day-to-day, staved it off by contradicting with a reassuring array of varied temperatures. (Entropy, 280)

With the constant 37° temperature and the apparent lack of energy transfer, Callisto seizes on the idea of the prophesied heat-death. He hastens to his memoirs, in which he delineates his encounter with thermodynamics and his rejection of the world, which has resulted in his present-day hothouse retreat.

In Henry Adamsian third-person, Callisto dictates to Aubade. The second law of thermodynamics has become an obsession and is the focus of his thoughts. As a younger man, Callisto says, he lightheartedly and naively captured the essence of entropy in a catchy saying; when the statisticians later verified the formula, he suddenly realized the apocalyptic implications. He recalls aloud:

"As a young man at Princeton . . . Callisto had learned a mnemonic device for remembering the Laws of Thermodynamics: you can't win, things are going to get worse before they get better, who says they're going to get better. At the age of 54, confronted with Gibbs' notion of the universe, he suddenly realized that undergraduate cant had been oracle, after all. That spindly maze of equations became, for him, a vision of ultimate, cosmic heat-death. He had known all along, of course, that nothing but a theoretical engine or system ever runs at 100% efficiency; and about the theorem of Clausius, which states that the entropy of an isolated system always continually increases. It was not, however, until Gibbs and Boltzmann brought to this principle the methods of statistical mechanics that the horrible significance of it all

dawned on him: only then did he realize that the isolated system--galaxy, engine, human being, culture, whatever--must evolve spontaneously toward the Condition of the More Probable." (Entropy, 282-83)

Before his encounter with the doomsaying statisticians, Callisto had adhered to Machiavelli's theory of fortuna and virtù. According to this philosophy, virtù, human agency, and fortuna, chance, each hold 50% of the power over human destiny. To offset this pessimism a bit, Machiavelli even allowed that by advance preparation and adaptation to changing times, actions attributable to virtù, fortuna's control could be somewhat reduced. Callisto had contented himself with the Florentine's odds; but Gibbs and Boltzmann denied them, for "'the equations now introduced a random factor which pushed the odds to some unutterable and indeterminate ratio which he found himself afraid to calculate'" (Entropy, 283).

Thermodynamics denies the efficacy of virtù. Physicists maintain that the chances of entropy decreasing in any closed system are incredibly small and that, should they ever possibly occur in a large system, it would require an astronomical length of time. Sir J. H. Jeans fixed the chances of escaping entropy, the chances of a single active atom surviving after being dissipated at $10^{420,000,000,000}$ to one!⁵¹ Overwhelmed by the awesomely immense odds against

⁵¹Dampier, p. 482.

any sort of survival for himself or his world, Callisto has rejected the optimistic pessimism of Machiavelli and adopted the distinctively fatalistic philosophy of the thermodynamicists.

Through entropy-colored glasses, Callisto has surveyed his surroundings only to find manifestations of an operative second law embracing his society. Callisto "found in entropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in his own world. He saw, for example, the younger generation responding to Madison Avenue with the same spleen his own had once reserved for Wall Street: and in American 'consumerism' discovered a similar tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos" (Entropy, 283-84). The typically American "Keep-up-with-the-Joneses" syndrome has resulted in a non-diversified society in equilibrium. Manipulated conformity is the byword, and the American obsession with acquiring things will continue throughout Pynchon's works to be the brunt of his most bitter satiric commentary.

The Madison Avenue madness Callisto scorns has produced, as Erich Fromm has so aptly commented, a populace alienated from itself through its marketing orientation. Wylie Sypher insists that a tragic result of this country's buying sickness is that modern Americans have become

"selfless," since "our selves are identical with our roles as consumers whose desires must be immediately satisfied by products we buy to give us the status we wish. Since we do not need what we consume, even our satisfactions are alienated from the self. Thus we have projected the self into things, and have lost ourselves in worshipping idols of the marketplace."⁵² Rampant consumerism has effected human degradation in the aspect of a deterioration in personal value and direction.

Witnessing human decline, of which consumerism is only one symptom, Callisto, like his mentor, Henry Adams, assumes that human society must unavoidably fall prey to the second law of thermodynamics and dictates: "'He found himself, in short, restating Gibbs' prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease'" (Entropy, 283-84). What Callisto foresees is a steady-state environment in which matter and energy, in the form of ideas and information, will be so uniformly distributed that no further exchange will be possible, since, as Peter Abernethy states, "the shifting of similar ideas to similar places leaves one at the same place he began, for all

⁵²Loss of the Self, p. 72.

practical purposes."⁵³

Callisto recalls that the first signs of intellectual inertia revealed themselves in the decadent music which emerged after World War I; always seeking correspondences, he discovers a direct link between an exhausted music and an exhausted populace, both being indications of a greatly changed world. Retrospectively pondering the immediate post-war scene, he wonders "how many musicians were left after Passchendaele, after the Marne?" (Entropy, 288). If anything, Stravinsky's "sad, sick dance in . . . L'Histoire du Soldat" pointed up the coming soul-sickness, for Stravinsky "had managed to communicate in that tango the same exhaustion, the same airlessness one saw in the slicked-down youths who were trying to imitate Vernon Castle, and in their mistresses, who simply did not care" (Entropy, 287-88). In Callisto's mind, that war changed everything irredeemably for the worse, and, still haunted by the memory of the holocaust, he has totally rejected the world which has survived it. He has relegated himself to the past, beyond the influence of consumerism, intellectual inertia, decadent music and deteriorating human values. Callisto has shut out the contemporary Wasteland, he believes, by withdrawing out of reach, by denying the reality of a Street applicable to himself, and he has accomplished

⁵³ "Entropy in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," p. 21.

this by creating his own world in the form of an isolated hothouse, a "private time-warp" (Entropy, 292).

To counterpoint Callisto's concept of music as a symptom of decadence and entropy as a thermodynamical and historical process is Aubade's concept of music as a measure of order and entropy as an integral element of information theory. Whereas her lover rejects all present-day music, Aubade apprehends her world entirely through sound. To glean only music, to discard noise from the sound which surrounds her is the focus of her every effort and "the one singing string of her determination" (Entropy, 283).

Ensconced in her hothouse universe, discordant sounds from the Street and, presently, from the party below obscure the pure melody Aubade seeks: "The architectonic purity of her world was constantly threatened by such hints of anarchy: gaps and excrescences and skew lines, and a shifting or tilting of planes to which she had continually to readjust lest the whole structure shiver into a disarray of discrete and meaningless signals. . . . she crawled into dreams each night with a sense of exhaustion, and a desperate resolve never to relax that vigilance" (Entropy, 283).

Unfortunately, that vigilance and those constant and concentrated efforts to achieve "that precious signal-to-noise ratio, whose delicate balance required every calorie of her strength" (Entropy, 287), are, as information theorists aver, destined to ultimate failure, since entropy

must irreversibly increase. The pure music, the "arabesques of order" (Entropy, 287), Aubade strives so desperately to intuit are fleeting and fragmentary, emerging only at intervals through the "cusps and ogees of noise" (Entropy, 287) which inevitably seep into the apartment from the real world outside. Focusing her being on the task of creating a world of melody, Aubade lives "on her own curious and lonely planet" (Entropy, 280). Like Mucho Maas, who lives alone in a "sound world" induced by LSD, Aubade is isolated by her endeavors to reduce her world to harmonious tones, and, for all her determination, her creation is only a world of ashes (Entropy, 292), perpetually threatened with obliteration by the "howling darkness of discordancy" (Entropy, 280) which unavoidably penetrates the hothouse.

Contrapuntal to Aubade's struggle with informational entropy and the destructive tendencies of noise is Meatball Mulligan's initiation into the complexities of information theory. Communication or, rather, the human inability to communicate emerges as a major theme and contributes to the motif of societal entropy. Most of Meatball's guests are employed in communication-related fields, working as employees of the State Department and the National Security Agency or as musicians. A favorite pastime of this crowd is the staging of polyglot parties, at which all who cannot carry on simultaneous conversations in three or four

languages are ceremoniously ignored (Entropy, 278).

Saul, one of Meatball's recently-arrived guests, has just separated from his wife over an argument about communication theory, "a field you can go off the deep end in" (Entropy, 184-85). An employee on the government's top secret project, MUFFET (multi-unit factorial field electronic tabulator), Saul believes human behavior is as mechanical as a program fed into an IBM machine, a fact which is "sort of crucial to communication, not to mention information theory" (Entropy, 285); his wife, Miriam, on the other hand, cannot tolerate the idea of computers acting like people and sees her husband, as Meatball suggests, as a "'cold, dehumanized amoral scientist type'" (Entropy, 285), typical of society's degeneracy. Saul vehemently denies this accusation and tries to convince the sympathetic Meatball that he truly is concerned about communication and the obstacles which hinder it.

Saul introduces Mulligan to the problem of noise in the process of transmitting information; he says: "'Tell a girl: 'I love you.' No trouble with two-thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, that's the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit'" (Entropy, 285). Meatball's response to Saul's explanation is the epitome

of noisy communication; he offers: "'Well, now, Saul . . . you're sort of, I don't know, expecting a lot from people. I mean, you know. What it is is, most of the things we say, I guess, are mostly noise'" (Entropy, 286). Noticing the reply is full of redundancy, ambiguity and irrelevancy, both men agree that noise cannot be eliminated from communication, and information is destined to be distorted by entropy. They conclude that compromise is the best which can be hoped for, that "you never run at top efficiency, usually all you have is a minimum basis for a workable thing" (Entropy, 286). All people must, therefore, simply do the best they can to cope with the disorder which cannot be avoided.

Soon after his enlightening conversation with Saul, Meatball discovers the Duke di Angelis quartet attempting to achieve what he and Saul had previously decided to be impossible--to run at 100% efficiency, to eliminate noise completely. The group is having a practice session without instruments. In Maxwell Demon-like fashion, each member tries to communicate telepathically, to think the root cords. Duke is optimistic that, even though "there are a few bugs to work out" (Entropy, 290), it is possible to think root cords and lines and create music on a purely psychic level, thereby eliminating noise. However, when three musicians "play," appropriately, "These Foolish Things," the fourth "plays" "I'll Remember April." Meatball receives concrete verification of Saul's theory of compromise.

Entropy can neither be avoided nor overcome.

Surveying his other guests, Meatball, with a horrified awareness dawning on him (Entropy, 290), recognizes that the disorder of his party is reaching a crisis state. Although guests arrive and depart, the system is, for all practical purposes, closed, since all of the people in attendance are of the same depraved caliber, and the shifting of similar to similar results in inertness. As Meatball scans the crowd, he notices: five sailors, "all in varying stages of abomination" (Entropy, 287), who have crashed Mulligan's apartment, convinced it is a brothel; Saul, who is dropping water-filled bags on passers-by from the fire escape; a drunken brawl, which is engaging the activities of most guests; and a coed, who is drowning in the shower. In an advanced stage of deterioration, Meatball's party has degenerated into rampant disorder.

Grasping the situation, Meatball begins to formulate alternatives for action: "The way he figured, there were only about two ways he could cope: (a) lock himself in the closet and maybe eventually they would all go away, or (b) try to calm everybody down, one by one" (Entropy, 291). The first possibility is the easier and more attractive, but the closet, he decides, is dark and stuffy, and he doesn't want to be alone in it; besides, one of the sailors would probably kick the door down sooner or later, and Mulligan would have to face the disorder outside anyway.

Discarding option A, the host considers that the "other way was more a pain in the neck, but probably better in the long run," so decides to "try to keep his lease-breaking party from deteriorating into total chaos" (Entropy, 291). He stops the brawling, saves the drowning woman, repairs broken furniture and generally attempts to introduce an element of order into the system. He continues his constructive efforts throughout the day, and by nightfall "most of the revellers had passed out and the party trembled on the threshold of its third day" (Entropy, 292).

At the same point in time, entropy also appears to be moving into a final state on the upstairs level. The bird Callisto has been sheltering finally dies, and the obsessed man is terrified: "'I held him,' he protested, impotent with the wonder of it, 'to give him the warmth of my body. Almost as if I were communicating life to him, or a sense of life. What has happened? Has the transfer of heat ceased to work? Is there no more . . .'" (Entropy, 292). The bird has died, and the temperature still registers 37° Fahrenheit. In Callisto's mind, the heat-death is beginning. The final stage of equilibrium is arriving. Having previously chosen as his course of action withdrawal into the hothouse, Callisto is incapable of reaction when his self-made world fails of its purpose.

Paralyzed by his total retreat from present reality, Callisto has no inner resources with which to combat the

situation; he is "helpless in the past" (Entropy, 292). Rather, Aubade, who had "sensed his obsession long ago, realized somehow that the constant 37° was now decisive" (Entropy, 292), and she takes action. She understands finally that their hothouse has not arrested the passage of time. Just as noise seeps in to destroy the music of her world, so entropy will eventually claim their carefully-created sanctuary; they cannot escape it. Aubade runs to the window, smashes the glass and turns to Callisto. She realizes there remains nothing but to wait, "wait with him until the moment of equilibrium was reached, when 37 degrees Fahrenheit should prevail both outside and inside, and forever, and the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion" (Entropy, 292).

With its dark ending, "Entropy" presents a bleak vision. Evidence of increasing disorder is everywhere, and the world as a closed system is deteriorating on all levels of energy exchange. The chances that it can be saved, Pynchon says, are none. His sentiments are echoed in the following statement by Norbert Weiner: "To those of us who know the extremely limited range of physical conditions under which the chemical reactions necessary so life as we know it can take place, it is a forgone conclusion that the lucky accident which permits the continuation of life in any form on this earth, even without restricting life to

something like human life, is bound to come to a complete and disastrous end."⁵⁴ The inevitability of the final equilibrium is a fact; the heat-death cannot be avoided or postponed. With the irreversibility of entropy established, what remains to man is simply to choose how he will face the end.

Meatball and Callisto illustrate two alternatives for action. Of their polarity, Tony Tanner states: "In that composite image of the pragmatic man actively doing what he can with the specific scene, and the theorizing man passively attempting to formulate the cosmic process, Pynchon offers us a shorthand picture of the human alternatives of working inside the noisy chaos to mitigate it or standing outside, constructing patterns to account for it."⁵⁵ Meatball Mulligan represents the choice of the Street, involvement in the present, while Callisto's choice of the hothouse indicates an isolated retreat to the past.

Callisto's action resembles that of Dennis Flange, but with a new twist. Flange withdraws from the contemporary world into a self-created fantasy realm; his is a refusal to participate. Callisto's choice of the hothouse results in an inability to participate. He not only withdraws from the everyday world but denies its reality. The

⁵⁴The Human Use of Human Beings, pp. 25-26.

⁵⁵City of Words, p. 155.

further he retreats and the longer he remains isolated, the less able he is to cope with the world which, although he denies its presence, remains just outside the hothouse.

Callisto is the human metaphor for what Pynchon believes to be happening scientifically in our dying world. Through his withdrawal from life, he becomes as entropic as the universe he decries. Norbert Weiner states that "to be alive is to participate in a continuous stream of influences from the outer world . . . To be alive in the figurative sense to what is happening in the world, means to participate in a continual development of knowledge and its unhampered exchange."⁵⁶ Callisto refuses to do this. By stopping his personal clock before World War I, he is dead to the contemporary world, which is reality. An isolated system, he is like Maxwell's Demon; with no energy penetrating from the outside, the system becomes entropic and eventually dies. Shut off completely from outside influences, Callisto cannot avoid equilibrium. When reality touches him, as it eventually must, he has no action resource, no remaining energy with which to combat it.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Meatball Mulligan. His action plan is infinitely more difficult and unpleasant than Callisto's, since it is a form of attack rather than retreat. Meatball opts for involvement with the

⁵⁶The Human Use of Human Beings, p. 135.

Street and, in so doing, chooses to cope as best he can with a desperate situation. His efforts to create order are futile, for, as Wylie Sypher states, "the destiny of man is obliteration, and life is only a brief rebellion against the randomness into which things are ebbing."⁵⁷ But Meatball's actions are positive and vital and imply both a rebellion and a valid existence rather than the fatigued, slow dying of Callisto. To be eventually defeated is an inevitability in a world so far along the road to ruin. Likening the approaching end to a shipwreck, Weiner insists: "There is a very true sense in which we are shipwrecked passengers on a doomed planet. Yet even in a shipwreck, human decencies and human values do not necessarily all vanish, and we must make the most of them. We shall go down, but let it be in a manner to which we may look forward as worthy of our dignity."⁵⁸ Meatball's positive, albeit limited and vain, response merits Weiner's and Pynchon's approval.

Charles Harris comments upon Meatball's approach to his situation in a similar vein; he maintains that "regardless of the absurdity of all actions in a universe doomed to disintegration, man must attempt to prevent entropy. Although such attempts are foredoomed to failure, the delusion

⁵⁷Loss of the Self, p. 74.

⁵⁸The Human Use of Human Beings, p. 26.

that disintegration can be resisted results in a humanism that, if desperate, is, Pynchon believes, nonetheless necessary."⁵⁹ In the entropic Wasteland, effort--what Sypher terms the "agony of willing, a striving that is incapable of any satisfaction"⁶⁰--is everything. Indeed, it prevents nothing, for failure is a forgone conclusion; yet, to exert effort is an affirmative response to a world which is nearly bereft of alternatives. The Meatball Mulligan approach to life enables man to resist, at least temporarily, the drift toward chaos and darkness. Willing and striving are, however, unpleasant and arduous tasks. Retreat, Pynchon says, is an easier and, therefore, more frequently chosen alternative. Sidney Stencil succumbs to the comfort of the past when present reality becomes unbearable. Expending energy becomes a monumentally frustrating task, as Oedipa discovers. And the striving to create order too often evolves into an extreme form of willing which results in the paranoid quest, a theme introduced in "The Secret Integration."

⁵⁹ Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd, p. 92.

⁶⁰ Loss of the Self, p. 75.

III

There can be no doubt that Sidney Stencil is modeled after Henry Adams; the parallels between the two are too striking to be coincidental. Adams, descended from a long line of distinguished politicians, spent his life as an observer of and commentator upon American government and international diplomacy. A leading historian, the disillusioned idealist was obsessed with analyzing the track of history, which, at the end of the nineteenth century, was shattered and, Adams believed, irreparably altered for the worse. Pessimistically witnessing recurring economic and international crises, mass production and a terrifying unleashing of scientific energies, corrupt politics and the rapid growth of an urban industrialized society and, to his disgust, the emergence of the vulgar, uneducated, common man, Henry Adams saw 1900 as the year after which events would never again be infused with any sort of coherence or logic.

In his autobiography, Adams chronicled the events of 1900 which so appalled him and which signaled the death of an old order and the radical birth of a new one. Having largely resigned his position as participant in current affairs and assumed the role of detached bystander, he wrote:

The child born in 1900 would, then, be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple. Adams tried to imagine it, and an education that would fit it. He found himself in a land where no one had ever penetrated before; where order was an accidental relation obnoxious to nature; artificial compulsion imposed on motion; against which every free energy of the universe revolted; and which, being merely occasional, resolved itself back into anarchy at last. He could not deny that the law of the new multiverse explained much that had been most obscure, especially the persistently fiendish treatment of man by man; the perpetual effort of society to establish law, and the perpetual revolt of society against the law it had established; the perpetual building up of authority by force, and the perpetual appeal to force to overthrow it; the perpetual symbolism of a higher law, and the perpetual relapse to a lower one; the perpetual victory of the principles of freedom, and their perpetual conversion into principles of power; but the staggering problem was the outlook ahead into the despotism of artificial order which nature abhorred. (Ed., 457-58)

Perhaps the appearance of the Dynamo was most frightening to Adams, and he looked on its ever-increasing energies with alarm. At one point in his later life, he was forced to buy an automobile, which, he wrote, "was a supreme demonstration because this was the form of force which Adams most abominated" (Ed., 469). But the Dynamo was only one of many bits of evidence which led Adams to believe that society, America and the universe as a whole, all subject to the second law of thermodynamics, were surely and steadily deteriorating into chaos and rapidly approaching the heat-death Clausius had predicted. Dying in 1918, Henry Adams escaped the end, which, he thought, must take

place near the year 1921.

Sidney Stencil is close to the time and temperament of Henry Adams. Like the historian, says Don Hausdorf, Stencil is "enmeshed in international diplomacy and enraptured by historical speculation, and he has the frightening feeling that the world is in chaos and time is running down."⁶¹ Like Henry Adams, Stencil is frightened by the new force of the machine and states: "'I'm frightened to death of automobiles.' Indeed he was. . . . Autos, balloons, aeroplanes; he'd have nothing to do with them" (V., 446). Sidney also recognizes that the end of the nineteenth century was the end of the world he had known; in 1899, the Situation began a disintegration from which it would not recover.

In 1919, having somehow lived through a war which, he believes, must surely signal the end, Sidney Stencil finds himself in a world wherein order has been put to rout, and chaos prevails. He has witnessed the emergence and recent supremacy of mob violence. He faces a Situation which is empty of logic and created purely by chance as well as a deteriorated Game played by no discernible Rules. Finally unwilling to cope with a reality which repels him and a world which has outgrown him, the old spy withdraws into the past to relive a long-ago love affair, only to discover

⁶¹"Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," p. 263.

when thrust back into the Street that his combatative energies have atrophied, leaving him fit for nothing but death. That death occurs in 1919, one year after the death of Henry Adams.

As Stencil travels with the old shipmaster, Mehemet, to Malta on what will prove to be his last assignment, he reflects on the horror of the recent war, which is too immense for him to grasp intellectually. While the people of the world revel in thoughts of Armistice, the old spy ponders Apocalypse. Convinced that the world-wide havoc prefigures an ever-nearing Armageddon, Stencil believes the peace pact to have accomplished nothing. Unlike the rest of the world, which has gone crazy with singing, parading and noise-making, he scorns the Armistice as foolish and dishonorable, as the "loathsome weakness of retreat into dreams: pastel visions of disarmament, a League, a universal law" (V., 431). Visualizing in his mind's eye Viscount Grey's lamps being extinguished one by one all over Europe, Stencil foresees only the sudden appearance of the Nameless Horror which will light the world into the flames of a final holocaust.

The coming of the Horror will be the fantastic finale of a slowly unfolding play. As appalling as the war's statistics are--"Ten million dead. Gas. Passchendaele" (V., 431)--they are, to Stencil, only one clear step along the road to total ruin. The war was an integral part of a

gradual process, he says: "'We all saw it. There was no innovation, no special breach of nature, or suspension of familiar principles. If it came as any surprise to the public then their own blindness is the Great Tragedy, hardly the war itself'" (V., 431-32). Stencil's long-held hatred of the masses has reached its peak, for, to them, ignorant and unconcerned, the war had come as a surprise. Never noticing the gradually-developing but obvious symptoms, the public, to Stencil's chagrin, views the war as "a new and rare disease which has now been cured and conquered for ever" (V., 433). Sidney knows there has been no cure and cannot stave off thoughts of terminating Apocalypse.

It is Mehemet, however, lost as he is in his medieval hothouse, who understands that the world will go out not with Stencil's bang but with entropy's whimper. The xebec master, like Callisto, has fashioned for himself a hothouse in which present events are of no consequence. Mehemet, whose "recurring lament was for a world taken from him" (V., 432), has retreated from the actual world into a universe composed of the Middle Ages' trade routes. The legend having grown that "he had in fact sailed the xebec through a rift in time's fabric" (V., 432), he has adopted an obsolete Levantine tongue and even reckons by the Moslem calendar in conversation, logs and account books.

Ensconced in his medieval hothouse, Mehemet has forever forsaken land, always in flux and eternally in

decay, for the Mediterranean, which seems to remain unchanged from one age to the next. Mehemet's retirement to the past is not, however, an attempt to resist the entropical process which chronicles the demise of the world. He knows that actual time cannot be arrested. Unlike Callisto, he does not deny the validity of the present; neither does he have any illusions about forestalling the end. He simply finds the past a more pleasant place to await its arrival.

The old sailor perceives a world running down, slowly dying of old age. Whereas Stencil posits a cosmos gradually becoming more and more diseased, succumbing by degrees to an advancing illness which will be terminated only by an excruciating death, Mehemet sees a world which is simply and slowly wearing itself out. He tells Stencil: "'You're old . . . I am old, the world is old; but the world changes always; we, only so far. It's no secret what sort of change this is. Both we and the world, M. Stencil, begin to die from the moment of birth'" (V., 432). No less pessimistic than the spy's view, Mehemet's is one of entropical deterioration. There is, he perceives, no way to improve or delay the irreversible process: "'The only change is toward death . . . Early and late we are in decay'" (V., 433).

When Stencil counters again with his theory of a ravaging illness, Mehemet answers: "'Is old age a

disease? . . . The body slows down, machines wear out, planets falter and loop, sun and stars gutter and smoke. Why say a disease? Only to bring it down to a size you can look at and feel comfortable?" (V., 433). Mehemet realistically sees the world in the grips of a natural scientific process, and, according to that process, all systems and societies, from the lowest to the most expansive, are destined, like an unwinding clock, to run down until they become inert; they are destined to wear out by degrees until they finally die. Any attempts to alter or divert that course are futile.

In such a light Mehemet views the newly-created Armistice, which, it has been universally acclaimed, is supposed to insure safety, security and prosperity for coming generations. The old master muses that this new truce and all other "noisy attempts to devise political happiness: new forms of government, new ways to arrange the fields and workshops" (V., 432) bear a remarkable resemblance to the actions of a sailor he once encountered in his travels. The young man was discovered painting the side of a sinking ship irreparably damaged in a storm. The captain and crew had drowned, and, all alone at night and refusing to be rescued, the young sailor continued to paint the doomed vessel until death relieved him of his task. Equally vain and ridiculous, Mehemet infers, are attempts to put a new coat of paint on a sinking society.

Mehemet's calm resignation adds to Stencil's despair. With Henry Adams-like pessimism, the spy reflects on an earlier time in his life and on his present circumstances and admits to the captain: "'As a youth I believed in social progress because I saw chances for personal progress of my own. Today, at age sixty, having gone as far as I'm about to go, I see nothing but a dead end for myself, and if you're right, for my society as well'" (V., 433). The fact of entropy denies the slightest glimmer of hope; it is a trifle more palatable than the Apocalypse Sidney had previously envisioned for his world, since "of course we would all prefer to die of old age" (V., 434), but it implies a total nihilism nonetheless.

A thermodynamical convert, Stencil has been persuaded that the Nameless Horror he has dreaded is not a sudden Armageddon but a scientific process, and "despite all attempts to cut its career short the tough old earth would take its own time in dying and would die of old age" (V., 434). The sixty-year-old spy, suddenly receptive to correspondences and manifestations he never fully understood before, realizes that evidences of entropy have been all around him for some time. And nowhere have symptoms of decay and deterioration been more apparent than in the ubiquitous Situation, of which he has been a part for most of his life.

A precise definition and an assimilated

understanding of any Situation have evaded Sidney Stencil throughout his years with British Intelligence. An abstract entity (V., 173), a Situation, for Stencil, encompasses all the contributing factors of any political-diplomatic crisis. A thoroughgoing Machiavellian, Stencil believed as a younger man that Situations were the products of the world's princes, whose actions were governed evenly by the forces of fortuna and virtú. Accident, or chance, shaped 50% of any political event, human agency the other 50%. Therefore, although a Situation could never be totally understandable because of the inherent element of chance, it still possessed an inner, if ominous, logic because the princes' virtú-ous actions directed its outcome.

The princes were wise men of politics: disciplined, dynamic, single leaders. In their hands rested the ability to determine governments, fix boundaries and create history. But, entering Malta in 1919, Stencil knows the Situation, like the world, is and has been steadily decaying. The Prince has been usurped by the mob. Chance has dispelled virtú and dominates the Situation. The politics of 1919, Stencil finds, are the politics of the Street, and the Street has become terrifying.

It was Florence in 1899 which, if Sidney had known then of entropy, would have alerted him to the slow dying. Thinking back on it, he realizes that it had had all the symptoms of a Situation-in-decay. Even then it was

"frankly appalling . . . irreparably bitched up" (V., 173) and made no sense from any angle of observation. The old spy had long understood that a Situation has no objective reality and exists only in the minds of those participating at the time (V., 174). In that Florence of 1899, everyone was participating. The people were rioting in the streets; chaos was rampant. The Prince was not in control, and doom seemed imminent.

At that time, "Soft Shoe Sidney," so named by the Foreign Office because of his demand for diplomatic teamwork, was convinced that "the success or failure of any diplomatic issue must vary directly with the degree of rapport achieved by the team confronting it" (V., 174). Over the Vheissu/Venezuela crisis there was no rapport, only twistings and elaborate maneuverings (V., 147). Machiavelli had advocated simple conflict and a delicate balance between the lion and the fox, between force and fraud. At the end of the century, there was evidence of a drastic "sort of imbalance, that tilt toward the more devious, the less forceful" (V., 183), and Florentine Machiavellians lamented: "'What has happened to the strength, the aggressiveness, the natural nobility of the lion? What sort of an age is this where a man becomes one's enemy only when his back is turned?" (V., 147). In 1899 the whole arena of politics began to change. Stencil did not then totally understand the change but knew instinctively it was a change for the

worse. When the assignment was suddenly cancelled as quickly as it was given--for no apparent reason and while the Situation was still extreme--Stencil left Florence bewildered and mortified.

Almost immediately upon his entrance into Valletta, the spy notices "all the earmarks of a Situation-in-the-process-of-becoming" (V., 442-43); he senses the "reactivation of the same chaotic and Situational forces at work in Florence twenty years ago" (V., 442). With the reappearance of Demivolt, whom he has not seen since that time, Stencil is reminded of "the ill-starred year in Florence . . . each unpleasant detail quivering brightly in the dark room of his spy's memory" (V., 442). And during the years since the disastrous Florentine affair, the Situation itself has devolved into a N-Dimensional Mish-mash (V., 443), more complex than at any previous time. Stencil still maintains: "'Short of examining the entire history of each individual participating . . . short of anatomizing each soul, what hope has anyone of understanding a Situation?'" (V., 443); yet, a wiser man than that of 1899, the Stencil of 1919 knows there is no hope of understanding the present Situation, for the participants are too numerous.

On Malta in 1919, everyone is contributing to the crisis, including the poor, the civil servants, the dockyard workers, the police force, the university students, the Church, the tradesmen, the millers and the political

factions of Bolsheviks, anti-colonial extremists, Abstentionists and Mizzists. The primary question, that of self-rule for Malta, has led to a chaotic Situation involving "every group on the island with a grudge. This would include nearly everyone but the OAG and his staff" (V., 443). Once, the number of participants was limited, the power of politics and diplomacy resting only in the hands of the princes; now, the number is vast, that power having somehow slipped into the grasp of the rabble, whose presence precludes the understanding of any Situation.

At times now, Stencil is visited by dreams in which he is assigned the task of deciphering the Situational code; these are nightmares, "fever dreams: the kind where one is given an impossibly complex problem to solve, and keeps chasing dead ends, following random promises, frustrated at every turn, until the fever breaks" (V., 443). In 1919, it appears to Stencil that the fever will not break, that he will not awaken from the nightmare. The Situation has become unintelligible.

More than this, however, the Situation has become terribly frightening. Politics in 1919 are politics of the Street, and the mob is touchy, self-seeking and ignorant, with each person interested in his own immediate desires. Throughout his life, Stencil has regarded the mob as did Machiavelli, who believed that all who composed it were treacherous and false unless compelled by necessity to be

true.⁶² Stencil, like the Florentine before him, believes that men in general are "ungrateful, voluble, dissemblers, anxious to avoid danger, and covetous of gain" (Prince, 90). But the rabble did not greatly concern Machiavelli, for in the fifteenth century it had no power, and its latent propensity for violence was easily squelched by a strong prince. On twentieth century Malta, the mob rules.

After only a short time on the island, Stencil observes the intermittent outbursts of the agitator-terrorists with growing alarm; he watches the rioters roam the streets, screaming, vandalizing, breaking windows, wrecking furniture and destroying buildings, all "with a holiday air (as if rioting were a healthy avocation like handicrafts or outdoor sports)" (V., 449). Mob violence is mindless but immensely attractive: "By its special magic a large number of lonely souls, however heterogeneous, can share the common property of opposition to what is. . . . like death it cuts through and gathers in all ranks of society" (V., 443). Its forceful appeal is tremendously difficult to counteract, and its demoniacal allure horrifies Stencil.

Even more terrifying than the appeal of mob communion is the unpredictability of mob-controlled situations.

⁶²Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci (1903; rev. and rpt. New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1952), p. 117. Hereafter cited as Prince.

Fortuna determines 100% of all occurrences. For Stencil, it is a dreadful irony that the rabble, so volatile and uncontrollable, can wreak havoc on the well-established, that "like an epidemic or earthquake the politics of the street can overtake even the most stable-appearing of governments" (V., 443). Chance rules. The line between order and chaos is infinitely fine, and the slightest chance event has the power to transform one instantaneously into the other: "Any minor accident: a break in the clouds, a catastrophic shivering at the first tentative blow to a shop window, the topology of an object of destruction . . . anything might swell a merely mischievous humor to suddenly apocalyptic rage" (V., 449). All of this is a deterioration from the decisive, purposeful, virtú-ous actions of the princes. It is a decay, a wearing down.

The entropy Mehemet had described on a physical and societal level, Stencil applies to the political level, which is his life. He foresees only imminent doom. For Stencil, an old campaigner, there has been a great and terrible loss, and it is a loss he cannot easily accept. Surveying the present chaotic Situation on Malta, he progresses through the stages of denial, rationalization and false optimism to a pessimistic and tentative resignation. He determines to cope as best he can, although dismally wondering "what had happened to diplomatic initiative" and how it had ever happened that "they" started calling the tune (V., 455).

Forseeing a course of future politics he is powerless to prevent, accepting as irretrievable the loss of diplomatic virtù and understanding the supremacy of the mob in present time on Malta and everywhere in future time, Stencil decides that "the June Assembly would become what it would: blood bath or calm negotiation, who could tell or shape events that closely? There were no more princes. Henceforth politics would become progressively more democratized, more thrown into the hands of amateurs. The disease would progress" (V., 461). With an attitude of abjuration, Stencil decides he can do little but watch political entropy take its toll. His resignation is temporary, however. When Sidney gradually realizes that the Game and the Rules have also decayed beyond recognition, he cannot cope. He can no longer accept or tolerate the Street or the Situation, and he retreats from both forever.

In previous years, when Situations were determined by princes, the mechanics, the internal workings, were carried out by "old campaigners," who emulated the tactics of the prince. The "how" of political crises centered itself firmly about the Game of diplomacy, which was played according to very strict Rules based on internationally accepted principles. Espionage was a profession for only the best men, the true sportsmen, and the true sportsmen felt an unshakeable loyalty to the Rules, regardless of their employers. Countries and nationalities were

unimportant; what truly mattered, more than politics per se, was the Game and how it was played.

As an inheritance from Machiavelli, old campaigners like Stencil understood that a spy must be cautious and courageous "and must proceed in a temperate manner with prudence and humanity, so that too much confidence does not render him incautious, and too much diffidence does not render him intolerant" (Prince, 89). Guarding against frivolousness, effeminacy and timidity, he must "so contrive that his actions show grandeur, spirit, gravity and fortitude" (Prince, 95), and, having formulated a plan of action, he must adhere steadfastly to it, exerting his utmost capacity for virtù. Maintaining at all times his integrity and self-respect, he must display the qualities of both the lion and the fox. Most important, as Stencil well knows, a true sportsman must take greatest pride in the state of opposition, the simple combat, declaring himself without reserve a true friend or a true enemy (Prince, 111). These were the Rules by which political Games were played and are, unfortunately, the Rules by which Sidney Stencil still operates.

Having witnessed the chaotic events of 1899 in Florence, Stencil sensed then that the Game and politics as a whole were beginning to change, that he and those remaining few like him were observing the end of an era. Now in Malta, Sidney finds himself initiated into an era in which

he and his colleague, Demivolt, may be the only two playing by any set of principles whatever. As events on the island progress, Stencil, with a growing disillusionment which culminates in physical illness, recognizes that the Game has become crude, and the Rules are Street Rules, as corrupt and tainted as Street politics.

Once, a loyal campaigner could rely implicitly on his superiors for instructions, cooperation and necessary guidance, for superiors were, after all, demi-princes themselves. In 1919, Stencil and Demivolt appear abandoned by headquarters as the F. O. remains uncommunicative and apparently disinterested day after day. While Sidney wonders if he and his friend have simply "been put out to pasture" on the island, Demivolt, too, senses an abandonment and admits: "'I've been afraid of that. We are old'" (V., 453). Clearly not the expected reward for years of loyal and unfaltering service, Stencil recognizes the disintegration of a Rule, asking Demivolt: "'It was different once . . . wasn't it?'" (V., 453).

The whole "MO" seems to be different. Being long-accustomed to the necessity of informers, the old campaigners had used them without attempting to understand their motives. But Stencil is at a complete loss over the double and triple agents he encounters on Malta, over their truly devious, thoroughly fox-like activities. With growing knowledge of Veronica Manganese's absurd carryings-on, he

cannot rationalize "what twisted Italian casuistry advised revealing any plot-in-mounting to one's enemies" (V., 452). Direct confrontation and professional integrity have somehow disappeared.

Still other Rules have evaporated. When Sidney encounters the work of I Banditti, a group of professional Italian assassins whose forte is ingenious and atrocious methods of murder, he is sickened to the point of nausea. Hearing that his informer's body was mutilated, the genitals removed and sewn into the mouth, Stencil, in a state of near-shock, can only ask himself weakly: "What's happened . . . The Situation used to be a civilized affair" (V., 456). All princes and prince-like men knew that physical injury should be committed only when necessary and should then be executed cleanly and quickly (Prince, 62). That the Game and Rules should now have been perverted by the sort of violence so characteristic of the mob is below Stencil's toleration level. The entire Situation, he suddenly realizes, has undergone too much decay.

Sadly, the spy reflects on his old friend, Porpentine, who, throughout his years with the Foreign Office, had lived--and finally died--by the Rules. Porpentine, too, had made Stencil's discovery of a world which no longer allowed him to operate successfully by principles. Like Stencil, he belonged to "a time where which side a man was on didn't matter: only the state of opposition itself,

the tests of virtue, the cricket game" (V., 431). That time has passed. But Stencil and the true sportsmen are past the point of wanting or being able to change. After so many years of abiding by the Rules, it is too dishonorable to forsake them for the ways of the fox and the violence of the mob. Having played the Game so well for so long, they cannot adhere to one important Machiavellian tenet: change with the times.

The Florentine had stated that a prince "is happy whose mode of procedure accords with the needs of the times, and similarly he is unfortunate whose mode of procedure is opposed to the times" (Prince, 121). The man who cannot adapt to changing circumstances, he warned, "will be ruined because he does not change his mode of procedure. No man is found so prudent as to be able to adapt himself to this, either because he cannot deviate from that to which his nature disposes him, or else because having always prospered by walking in one path, he cannot persuade himself that it is well to leave it" (Prince, 121-22). For whichever reason, Sidney Stencil, in 1919, finds he can neither change with the times nor cope with the Situation and wonders: "But what then does one do? Is there a way out?" (V., 455). Suicide has a great appeal, and Stencil wonders why he or anyone should continue to live in the twentieth century madness. But self-inflicted physical death is too great a departure for an old campaigner; death must be inflicted

only by a worthy opponent.

With the "men-of-no-politics, the once-respectable Golden Mean" (V., 440) obsolete now, Sidney is faced with a choice between the Right, where men "live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past," or the Left, outside, where men "prosecute their affairs in the Streets by manipulated mob violence" (V., 440). The Street is loathsome. Thus, the alternative which remains for Stencil is a retreat from present reality and the Situation, a withdrawal into the hothouse of the past. Like Callisto, who was not equal to the task of facing reality (Entropy, 283), Sidney Stencil drifts into his own graceful decadence and, in the process, his entropical decay.

Stencil's entrance into hothouse time is characterized by a gradual relinquishment of his regard for the Rules, a growing indifference to political events on Malta and a voluntary submission to nostalgia and melancholy. Contributing to his desire for a return to the more pleasant and compatible past and his deepening alienation from present time is the island of Malta, which seems changeless and eternal. As Fausto Maijstral is to say of the rock thirty-seven years later, Malta is as constant as the nature of womanhood; through decades of invasion, looting and bombing, she still "lies on her back in the sea, sullen; an immemorial woman" (V., 298). To many of the inhabitants of the island, time and history are of no consequence, since

"with nowhere to go in space but into the sea it can only be the barb-and-shaft of one's own arrogance that insists there is somewhere to go in time as well" (V., 296). In spite of the rest of the world, which Stencil knows to be dying, Malta seems forever the same, an ageless hothouse in her own right, and Sidney Stencil, desirous of the world before the change and willing to surrender any and all allegiance to present time, easily succumbs to the island's hothouse sense of time.

Soon after his arrival in Valletta, Stencil senses something in the atmosphere which sharply differentiates this city from others he has known: "Approaching or leaving other capitals one always caught the sense of a great pulse or plexus whose energy reached one by induction . . . But Valletta seemed serene in her own past, in the Mediterranean womb, in something so insulating that Zeus himself might once have quarantined her and her island for an old sin or an older pestilence. So at peace was Valletta that with the least distance she would deteriorate to mere spectacle. She ceased to exist as anything quick or pulsed, and was assumed again into the textual stillness of her own history" (V., 446). Having peered into the chaotic Situational forces erupting on the island, Stencil desires the same serenity and insulation Valletta enjoys in her historical stability.

When the events of 1919 seem to recapitulate 1899,

Stencil has the opportunity to find that comfort as he slips backward through the pages of his own history, for "Stencil was now ready to succumb to the feathery tentacles of a nostalgia which urged him gently back toward childhood; a childhood of gingerbread witches, enchanted parks, fantasy country" (V., 447). His reunion with Demivolt, the reappearance of Evan Godolphin and Lady V. and another mounting Situational crisis seem to recreate his personal history. Demivolt, too, feels it and confides to his cohort: "'Old running mate . . . there is a tremendous nostalgia about this show. Do you feel it? The pain of a return home'" (V., 448). For Stencil it is indeed a return, but a return to the past rather than a return home. Events of an earlier time come forward to surround him. Feelings and instincts he has ignored since his entry into the profession resurface to contribute to his decay.

On Malta, Sidney suddenly experiences an overwhelmingly sad longing for previous days, a feeling he attributes partly to the ageless island: "Nostalgia and melancholy . . . Hadn't he bridged two worlds? The changes couldn't have been all in him. It must be an alien passion in Malta where all history seemed simultaneously present . . . in Valletta remembrances seemed almost to live" (V., 452). Malta, that "treacherous pasture" (V., 460), cajoles Stencil deeper into his past and alienates him from the politics of the Street. By veering increasingly toward the

hothouse, where he feels comfortable and secure, he becomes a stranger to the present, and "Stencil, at home everywhere in Europe, had thus come out of his element. Recognizing it was his first step down. A spy has no element to be out of, and not feeling 'at home' is a sign of weakness" (V., 453). The signs of weakness become more obvious and numerous as the spy progresses toward the Right. When he willingly enters actual hothouse time with V., his demise is insured.

When Sidney again meets the mysterious V. after a twenty-year interlude, he is ready to resume their old love affair as if the years and events between 1899 and 1919 never existed. No longer able to cope with a Situation grown too complex, barbarous and chaotic, heartsick at the disappearance of the Machiavellian Game and easily succumbing to nostalgia fostered by the island itself, Stencil recognizes that he has plunged under the threshold, that he can no longer maintain the self-control and discipline required of a spy.

Immediately upon seeing Veronica, now a semi-animate woman of thirty-nine, "Stencil suspected he'd be little use henceforth in either preventing or manipulating for Whitehall's inscrutable purposes whatever would happen in June" (V., 458). Instead of being "all for it" like so many times before, he ceases to combat the Situation or even to care about it. Although V. is his enemy, his "opposite

number" (V., 457), Stencil willfully enters into a liaison based on memories of the past, and the two of them "enter, hand in hand, the hothouse of a Florentine spring once again; to be fayed and filleted hermetically into a square (interior? exterior?) where all art objects hover between inertia and waking, all shadows lengthen imperceptibly though night never falls, a total nostalgic hush rests on the heart's landscape. And all faces are blank masks; and spring is any drawn-out sense of exhaustion or a summer which like evening never comes" (V., 458). By abandoning himself to V.'s hothouse, Stencil becomes a closed, entropic system.

Bereft of his once-firm purpose in life, Sidney disregards the fact that V. herself represents the violence and inhumanity which have made the Situation such an uncivilized affair; with her propensity for "absolute upheaval" (V., 458) and her "obsession with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter" (V., 459), V. is symbolic of the Street. Stencil is simply past caring. Faced with the enigma of V., he is again confronted with a choice between the hothouse and the Street, for although "riot was her element," so, too, is her "dark room, almost creeping with amassed objects. The street and the hothouse; in V. were resolved, by some magic, the two extremes" (V., 459).

Stencil again chooses the hothouse, deliberately ignoring the repulsive aspects of V.'s nature. Desperately

in need of resuming their old affair, he overlooks the clock-iris eye, the star sapphire sewn into the navel and a body nearly inanimate. For Sidney, V. is "the same balloon-girl who'd seduced him on a leather couch in the Florentine consulate twenty years ago" (V., 459). Whereas the former spy would have been frantically occupied with the usual tasks of espionage--shadowing leads, seeking informants, attempting to unravel the Situation--the present spy spends his time reliving the past and submitting to long-repressed emotions.

Stencil's surrender to forsaken instincts, which signals nemesis for a spy, is voluntary. He knows that Veronica holds no mysterious control over him; the weakness is his. His betrayal of Whitehall and his profession after so many years is attributable to nostalgia, "a tilt toward the past so violent he found it increasingly difficult to live in the real present he believed to be so politically crucial;" each afternoon with V. is a further "retreat into late-afternoon melancholy" (V., 460). Stencil allows himself to yarn with Mehemet of the glorious old world. Accompanied by Demivolt on his frequent drunken binges, he indulges in maudlin nostalgia as he reminisces about the "good old days" and sings outdated vaudeville songs. When he finally heeds Carla Maijstral's pleadings to dismiss her informer-husband for the sake of their unborn child, Stencil indifferently breaks a cardinal Rule.

Throughout his years as a spy, Stencil, like his old friend Porpentine, loved and hated only in the abstract; recognition of individuality--except the individual opponent--allowed the risk of personal involvement, which must be avoided at all cost. In his former dealings with others, Stencil was never "about to let personality enter the Situation; this would be courting chaos" (V., 451). Machiavelli himself had warned that a prince, having formulated a course of action, must "listen to no one, go about the matter deliberately, and be determined in his decisions" (Prince, 116). When the decaying campaigner listens to Carla and changes his plans out of sympathy for her, his career is finished.

Stencil's drifts into nostalgia, his desire to avoid any event tinged with contemporaneity and his paying heed to humanitarian instincts he had been forced to abandon upon his alliance with Whitehall all "combined to undermine what virtú he'd brought through sixty years on the go, making him really no further use in Malta" (V., 460). No longer a sportsman, Sidney denies the present and has no knowledge of the everyday world, "for it came to that finally: an alienation from time, much as Malta itself was alienated from any history in which cause precedes effect" (V., 460). Lost forever to the hothouse, he makes his final play of the Game when he sends Fausto from his employ: "From somewhere--bottom of the tank--came a last burst of

duplicity and virtù. He forced himself into the real present, perhaps aware it would be his last time there" (V., 461). Thus glimpsing the Street for the last time, Stencil relinquishes all resources which enabled him to operate effectively in present time.

As Stencil spends his days hermetically sealed with Veronica Manganese, events on the island culminate in the June Disturbances. Without his knowledge or concern, political tension grows and lessens, factions face and fire, the riots take a toll of wounded and dead, and then it is over. Stencil is oblivious to it all. The entirety of his life centers around his reactivated love affair. V.'s interest in the spy is purely temporary, however; she detains him only long enough to prevent his interference in the political turmoil. When Veronica is finished with Sidney, she dismisses him as easily as she had detained him. Bereft of her, Stencil is without a world. His hothouse existence shattered, the reality of the Street-world denied, he is lost and lifeless. Through a retreat to the past, he has decayed to the point of inertness; he has deteriorated through personal entropy. Leaving Malta with his eyes staring blankly ahead, he is as useless and lifeless as "some obsolete nautical figure" (V., 463). All that remains for Sidney Stencil is the death of the body, which he encounters not far off the island's shores.

IV

The Crying of Lot 49 is, in many respects, an entropic novel about entropy; the themes introduced in the short story pervade its pages, and the second law of thermodynamics is seen to be operating on all levels. Pynchon applies Henry Adams' concept of societal entropy to the human systems who roam the undifferentiated California landscape. The consumer madness which dynamo-capitalist Pierce Inverarity fostered has reduced individuality to homogeneous chaos. And Oedipa Maas, attempting to unravel the mystery of the tycoon's testament, finds herself in the position of a human Maxwell's Demon, frustrated at every turn by the unavoidable destruction of information.

Oedipa first comes across Maxwell's Demon when she visits with Stanley Koteks at the Yoyodyne plant. Having brought out a picture of John Nefastis' machine, Koteks tries to explain how the invention operates. He tells Oedipa that the Demon sits in the box among randomly-moving air molecules, sorting fast and hot ones from cold and slow ones. Since the faster molecules have more energy than slow ones, a concentration of them in one area of the box will produce a region of higher temperature. The temperature differential can then be used to drive a heat engine.

Koteks explains to Oedipa: "'Since the Demon only

sat and sorted, you wouldn't have to put any real work into the system. So you would be violating the Second Law of Thermodynamics, getting something for nothing, causing perpetual motion'" (Crying, 62). Oedipa interrupts to ask the question that proved nemesis for any possible Demon; she asks: "'Sorting isn't work? . . . Tell them down at the post office, you'll find yourself in a mailbag headed for Fairbanks, Alaska, without even a FRAGILE sticker going for you'" (Crying, 62). An unenlightened Koteks insists that the work is purely mental and not work in any thermodynamical sense.

Further, Stanley informs Mrs. Maas that John Nefastis owns a machine which contains an actual Demon, and "all you had to do was stare at a photo of Clerk Maxwell, and concentrate on which cylinder, right or left, you wanted the Demon to raise the temperature in. The air would expand and push a piston" (Crying, 62). The only catch, Koteks warns her, is that very few people can communicate with the Demon; few "sensitives" exist. Correctly perceiving that she has walked "uncoerced into the presence of madness" (Crying, 63), Oedipa is nonetheless determined to pay Nefastis a visit.

Within the first few minutes of that visit, she discovers that Nefastis is as hung up on a single word as she; 'entropy' "bothered him as much as 'Trystero' bothered Oedipa," and, without prompting, the inventor

undertakes an explanation of the term, which largely eludes Oedipa because "it was too technical for her" (Crying, 77). She does gather, however, that the word can somehow be applied to the communication process as well as to isolated heat systems, for, as Nefastis expounds, "the equation for one, back in the '30's, had looked very like the equation for the other. It was coincidence. The two fields were entirely unconnected, except at one point: Maxwell's Demon" (Crying, 77). He subsequently informs Oedipa of the principle which spelled doom for the Demon: the sorting process which was to decrease entropy was shown, contrarily, to maintain or increase the amount of entropy through the action of gaining the information necessary to sort.

The undaunted Nefastis believes, however, that he has the key necessary to solve the major problem besetting the Demon: by using psychic communication, a "sensitive" and the Demon could exchange information on the molecules in the box without raising the entropy level; the sensitive's task would be to communicate telepathically with the Demon, supplying him with the information which would allow him to decide which molecules should go where. Energy could thus be created which would, in turn, move the piston and allow a perpetual motion machine to operate.

As plausible as Nefastis' theory sounds to Oedipa, his assumptions are incorrect. Thomas Lyons and Allan Franklin clarify the defects of his thinking and the

faultiness of his physics:

If Nefastis had pursued his studies into the '50's, he would know that the supposedly perfect communication between the Demon and the "sensitive" is impossible because of the element of "noise." And the net loss of order represented by that "noise" precludes the possibility of perpetual motion. The system will not work even in the absence of "noise," since it is impossible to transform heat completely into work which is, in reality, what the machine is attempting to do. Entropy is a real property of both systems, not a metaphor and, Nefastis notwithstanding, it works against his machine.⁶³

Although Oedipa suspects that the inventor may be a lunatic, she sincerely desires to be the special sort of person who can aid the Demon, to be "the one that can share in the man's hallucinations" (Crying, 79), for the sharing itself would be fascinating. If Nefastis could create a functioning Maxwell's Demon, create a reality from a fiction, perhaps Oedipa can accomplish the same impossible feat with what seems to be a partially fictional Tristero. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, her efforts to assist the Demon do not succeed; she cannot communicate. Nefastis' notion is entirely ludicrous, for, as the Duke di Angelis quartet discovered in the short story, entropy-free communication is impossible.

For Oedipa Maas, a successfully-operating Maxwell's Demon is somehow crucially important. Although the

⁶³"Thomas Pynchon's 'Classic' Presentation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics," p. 202.

theoretical logic and mechanical explanation escape her, the possibilities intrigue. Having been told the Demon is the linking feature in a coincidence of entropy or disorder and communication or pattern, she very vaguely understands that a successful Demon could derive order from random chaos by sorting. Anne Mangel states that very much like the hypothetical creature, Oedipa herself soon tries "to link occurrences, to establish a point of order in what seems to be a random system of information."⁶⁴ Her efforts will prove as futile as the supposed attempts of the Demon.

As a sort of Maxwell's Demon, Oedipa cannot confound the second law of thermodynamics. Her efforts to glean order from Pierce Inverarity's scattered interests, to sort all of her gathered bits of information and to impose pattern upon the mass of hints, clues and symbols she accumulates are continuously thwarted by an accompanying increase of chaos and confusion. Anne Mangel borrows an illustration from David Hawkins' Language of Nature which clarifies Oedipa's situation; Mangel quotes: "When . . . molecules of gas, for example, are in a collective state of maximum entropy, or disorder, all the alternatives consistent with the given total energy are equally probable, and therefore, by the most efficient method of measurement possible, the precise determination of the exact state of

⁶⁴Anne Mangel, "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: The Crying of Lot 49," Tri-Quarterly, No. 20 (Winter, 1971), 197.

gas will require the maximum amount of information."⁶⁵

Thus, the more chaotic and disordered a system is, the greater the amount of information needed to describe that system. That greater amount of necessary information, in turn, only serves to create more disorder.

Inverarity's interests are so chaotic and widely-scattered that Oedipa needs all of her clues and leads to make sense of them. Yet, overwhelmed with necessary information, she encounters at every turn only increasing confusion; she is denied meaning and pattern, and, says Mangel, "the clues she gathers yield more clues in an infinite process. Opening out into more and more suggestions, they yield no conclusion."⁶⁶ It is intimated at the end of The Crying of Lot 49 that Oedipa could and probably will continue her sorting activities indefinitely, never achieving a clear understanding of the Tristero mystery. Her diligent efforts will prove to be the same sort of repetitious motion encapsulated in the yo-yo symbol--going and getting nowhere--which is another manifestation of entropy.

At the initial appearance of Oedipa Maas, the relationship between herself, Maxwell's Demon and the entropic process is established. As newly-named executrix, she is faced with the task of "sorting it all out" (Crying, 1), of

⁶⁵"Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information," p. 202.

⁶⁶"Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information," p. 198.

ordering the dead man's estate. In trying to conjure up a mental image of Pierce, she finds herself "shuffling back through a fat deckful of days" (Crying, 2). The deck-of-cards imagery is one traditionally associated with the irreversibility of entropy. Sir William Dampier explains: "This increase of entropy is analogous to shuffling a pack of cards, originally in order of numbers and suits, by a mechanical shuffler. The shuffling can never be undone, save by conscious sorting, or by the indescribably remote chance of the cards happening to fall into their original order again."⁶⁷ Inundated as Oedipa becomes with "cards" of information, she cannot separate the deck into "suits" of order. In spite of her conscious efforts to do so, she cannot sort it all out and decrease the amount of disorder which surrounds her.

In fact, as her quest progresses, Oedipa becomes so obsessed with the mysterious conspiracy and the muted posthorn that she creates more disorder than is necessary; as will be examined in the next chapter, she imagines posthorns which are non-existent and infers clues when none are present. Thus, in addition to the concrete information she must order, she is also forced to sort out mere hallucination. Discovering and creating Tristero connections everywhere, Oedipa engages in an impossible shuffling task.

⁶⁷A History of Science, p. 480.

Ultimately, her mission of piercing the mystery of Inverarity's legacy hangs on the meaning of one word--Tristero. To her dismay, she discovers that meanings and words themselves can all too easily be altered and, thereby, destroyed.

Complicating Oedipa's already-futile and frustrating sorting task is the entropic nature of the transmission of information. In recapitulating Shannon's second theorem, it will be remembered that when information is sent from one source to another, it is impossible to eliminate noise within or without the channel through which the information is transmitted. Except in ideal and rare instances, the message encoded at the source will not be absolutely identical to the message received at the level of cognition. This principle is seen in operation when, after Oedipa's radio broadcast, Mucho closes with: "'Thank you, Mrs. Edna Mosh'" (Crying, 103). To his wife's questioning the pronunciation of her name, Mucho explains: "'It'll come out the right way . . . I was allowing for the distortion on these rigs, and then when they put it on tape'" (Crying, 104). The process of communication necessarily destroys information, and, as Oedipa undertakes her Tristero mission, informational entropy frustrates her every effort.

While Mrs. Maas is observing a performance of The Courier's Tragedy, she is arrested by the couplet: "No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow/ Who's once been

set his tryst with Trystero" (Crying, 52) and by an initial reference to Thurn and Taxis. Later questioning of the director, Randolph Driblette, reveals that his script is only a copy made from a paperback entitled Jacobean Revenge Plays and that the author had not written in stage directions which Driblette arbitrarily included. He informs Oedipa that he feels no loyalty to the actual text of the play, maintaining: "'The words, who cares? They're rote noises to hold line bashes with, to get past the bone barriers around an actor's memory, right?'" (Crying, 56). With no fidelity to the word, Driblette feels free to alter and, thereby, destroy what was originally intended for communication. Oedipa, hung up on the word (Crying, 56), is to find this license a great hindrance to her quest.

Purchasing the paperback Driblette had mentioned, she finds the intriguing lines and is directed to compare them with those in a 1687 variant Quarto edition; she also discovers the text of the paperback to be taken from an undated Folio edition, the original hardcover being a textbook entitled Plays of Ford, Webster, Tourneur, and Wharf-inger, edited by one Emory Bortz. Understandably confused, Oedipa purchases the hardcover only to discover that her original paperback is not a direct reprint, for the hardcover lines now read: "No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow . . . / Who once has crossed the lusts of Angelo" (Crying, 74). Following the 1687 Quarto edition,

the couplet has been drastically altered.

Proceeding further, Oedipa finds that yet another version, the 1670 Whitechapel edition, sets the final line as: "This tryst or odious awry, O Niccolò" (Crying, 74). A subsequent visit to Emory Bortz leaves Oedipa more bewildered than ever. The editor insists Driblette had used his edition for The Courier's Tragedy, but when the sleuth recites the troublesome couplet, he is amazed to learn that he has been anonymously re-edited, that someone has filled his book with misprints and corruptions and inserted lines from a pornographic Courier's Tragedy found only in the Vatican Library. This outrageous re-editing will force Bortz to make further revisions in his updated edition, which, he informs Mrs. Maas, is soon to be published!

Harried over the numerous and untraceable alterations of the Tristero couplet, Oedipa is heartsick to discover that the words "Thurn and Taxis" have been similarly transmuted: from Thurn and Taxis to Thorn and Tacit to Torre and Tassis. In a children's game of hopscotch, she encounters a final distortion of both the Tristero reference and the name of the postal service when she hears: "Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three,/ Turning taxi from across the sea . . ." (Crying, 87). The words of the couplet have been so radically altered that any meaning they once contained has been completely destroyed; the words of the original have been changed, and, as Emory Bortz

states: "'What better way to damn it eternally than to change the actual words'" (Crying, 116-17). In the process of transmission from one person or source to another, the intended message has been subjected to so much noise that the result is negative information, chaos as a result of informational entropy. Oedipa will never discover the intended meaning behind the couplet in The Jacobean Revenge Plays, and, as Anne Mangel states, it is an application of Pynchon's irony that "one of the measures of transformation in information theory is termed a 'Jacobian.'"⁶⁸

Oedipa's unfortunate predicament of trying to gain precise meaning from separate sources is capsulized by Norbert Weiner when he likens such a situation to the translation of a book from one language to another in which there is no precise word equivalence. As the translation cannot have the exact meaning of the original, the translator is confronted with two alternatives: he may use phrases which are broader, vaguer and, therefore, more ambiguous than the author's (whereby the original emotional context is lost); or, he may supply his own meaning (by doing which he falsifies the author's information and alters the original message). In either case, much of the author's meaning is lost forever.⁶⁹ Additionally, as Emory Bortz

⁶⁸"Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information," p. 205.

⁶⁹The Human Use of Human Beings, p. 7.

discovers, misprints in the mechanical reproduction process will further destroy the message. In her search for the precise meaning of the Tristero and Thurn and Taxis references, Oedipa discovers that such forces have been at work. Entropy has occurred, and its results are irreversible; as information theorists avow, messages lose order, information, spontaneously in the act of transmission, but they never gain it.

John Nefastis explained the law to the heroine through the device of Maxwell's Demon; her ordeal with the lines of the play testifies to the veracity of the explanation. When Oedipa meets the suicidal Tristero sailor lying on his mattress, she is finally and awesomely convinced of how very easily information is destroyed; with the mattress serving as a metaphor for language and the process of communication, Oedipa is taken aback by the inevitability and irreversibility of the entropic process:

She remembered John Nefastis, talking about his Machine, and massive destructions of information. So when this mattress flared up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored, coded years of uselessness, early death, self-harrowing, the sure decay of hope, the set of all men who had slept on it, whatever their lives had been, would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. It astonished her to think that so much could be lost. (Crying, 95)

Enlightened by her revelations on the nature of information, Oedipa is able to apply what Nefastis has told her and what

she has learned first-hand about destruction and loss due to entropy to the San Narciso Wasteland which surrounds her. Surveying the environments through which her Tristero quest leads her, she discovers an even greater loss. Entropy has taken a tragic toll in geography and humanity alike.

If entropy signifies the destruction of information, it also relates to the degradation of the universe's matter and energy into an ultimate state of inert uniformity. In any closed system, as entropy increases, distinctions begin to disappear, elements move from the least to most probable state and differentiation deteriorates into sameness. The seemingly paradoxical elements of randomness, disorder and chaos which characterize entropic systems denote also, in Peter Abernethy's words, "uniformity, a lack of distinctions, a sameness, a lack of individuality, a tendency toward complete conformity."⁷⁰ Although an isolated system will tend toward a state of maximum disorder, it will, simultaneously, tend to the greatest homogeneity possible.

Norbert Weiner offers an example which depicts this concept of entropic uniformity when he cites the instance of a small community which residents do not leave and into which new people do not move. Although the town, analogous to a thermodynamically isolated system, may be initially

⁷⁰"Entropy in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49,"
p. 20.

composed of several separate families with distinctive names and physical characteristics, years of intermarriage and continuous cross-breeding will eradicate those distinctions. As Weiner states: "When a human community falls below a certain size, and has existed for a certain time, family names are no longer any use in it. It is highly probable that every member in the community will be a Smith or a Jones or something of the sort. Corresponding to this, they will have much the same genetic constitution."⁷¹ If new and different blood is not introduced into the village, the eventual result will be a sort of one large family, conforming not only in name but also in physical and biological makeup. The maximum disorder which accompanies this situation manifests itself in the well-documented mental deficiencies which occur as a result of such conformity.

Pynchon envisions the universe as just such a closed system in which maximum uniformity is coming to pass. In The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa's California is shown to be caught up in this process. All elements are tending to the most probable state; the geographical aspect of the land is as uniform as the inhabitants are non-individualized.

As the heroine enters San Narciso on the Sunday which initiates her quest, she is struck by its architectural

⁷¹The Human Use of Human Beings, p. 55.

consistency. Likening it to many other places she has visited in California, Oedipa notices that "it was less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts--census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (Crying, 12). Looking down upon a housing development, Oedipa observes the homogeneity of the "vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth" (Crying, 13). San Narciso, the name appropriately alluding to the mythical Greek figure of Narcissus, a self-entranced closed system who depended upon the emptiness of an echo,⁷² has the characteristics of a system locked in heat-death. As must happen when matter and energy reach a state of equilibrium, so in San Narciso, "nothing was happening" (Crying, 13). And San Narciso is, Pynchon states, a typical American city.

With its "battening, urged sweep of three-bedroom houses rushing by their thousands across all the dark beige hills" (Crying, 36), San Narciso is not unique, for "if there was any vital difference between it and the rest of Southern California, it was invisible on first sight" (Crying, 13). The highway to neighboring Los Angeles is "lined by auto lots, escrow services, drive-ins, small

⁷²Robert Murray Davis, "Parody, Paranoia, and the Dead End of Language in The Crying of Lot 49," Genre, 5 (1972), 373.

office buildings and factories whose address numbers were in the 70 and then 80,000's. She had never known numbers to run so high. It seemed unnatural" (Crying, 14). The undifferentiated geography appears endless, and as Oedipa continues driving, she sees not individualized constructions but "a prolonged scatter of wide, pink buildings, surrounded by miles of fence topped with barbed wire," which gives way only to "the familiar parade of more beige, prefab, cinderblock office machine distributors, sealant makers, bottled gas works, fastener factories, warehouses, and whatever" (Crying, 14). In similar fashion, when Oedipa travels to Oakland, she confronts "long hillsides jammed solid with two- or three-bedroom houses, all their windows giving blankly back only the sun" (Crying, 97). Looking over an invariable landscape, she is blinded by Oakland's "great empty glare" (Crying, 96). Thus, San Narciso, Los Angeles, Oakland and, by clearly implied extension, the entire country display, as Peter Abernethy states, a "nightmare landscape of crushing uniformity."⁷³ The environment, in its "silence and paralysis" (Crying, 14), is deteriorating in the throes of entropy.

Equally bleak is the human situation in the California cities. The Crying of Lot 49 is crammed with isolated human systems who seldom react and never really

⁷³"Entropy in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," p. 20.

interreact; the novel is populated above and below ground by what John Leland terms a conglomeration of "closed systems regressing endlessly upon themselves as they confront the task of existence."⁷⁴ Oedipa's world is full of alienated beings who have forsaken all attempts to make meaningful emotional contact, and the result has been an inner inertness and a failure of communication and love. In the many closed, semi-human systems she encounters, entropy is reaching a crisis state.

Appropriately residing at Echo Courts, the members of "The Paranoids" rock group echo the nothingness of their lives; non-individualized, their only identity is derived from English movies and Beatles records, and Oedipa is unable to tell them apart (Crying, 23). Yoyodyne, the industrial death-factory which supplies most of the employment opportunity in San Narciso, has perverted the singularly creative task of inventing into a business; its clause on patents robs employees of individuality and integrity and grinds them into anonymous, undifferentiated non-entities. Yoyodyne itself is an entropic enterprise, and the yo-yo image is as suited to it as to Benny Profane. Just as Profane, for all of his incessant wandering, goes nowhere, so Yoyodyne represents a useless expenditure of energy; its output, asserts Peter Abernethy, in spite of

⁷⁴John P. Leland, "Pynchon's Linguistic Demon: The Crying of Lot 49," Critique, 16, No. 2 (1974), 45.

the appearance of dynamism, is futile activity since "its products are oriented toward the meaningless cycle of producing weapons to counter other weapons which, in turn, will themselves have to be countered. It is a closed system."⁷⁵

Oedipa's co-executor, Lawyer Metzger, excellently depicts the entropic process on a human level. Like Callisto, he has endeavored to halt the progress of encroaching time and age by withdrawing into the hothouse of the past. Twenty years previous to his meeting with the heroine, Metzger had been a child actor named Baby Igor, and into this role he has frozen himself. He hopes to remain a perpetual child by ignoring his present self and continuously repeating Baby Igor-like activities. Metzger believes he can forever be the person captured on film, since film can be stored indefinitely in Hollywood's air-conditioned studio vaults where "light can't fatigue it, it can be repeated endlessly" (Crying, 20). The lawyer's night with Oedipa reveals, however, that even film cannot guarantee the security of his youth. When the reels of Cashiered, an early Igor film, are mixed up, the continuity and logic of the movie are obliterated, resulting in chaos and absurdity. Film can be destroyed, and Baby Igor must be destroyed in the process. Although Metzger seeks to

⁷⁵"Entropy in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," p. 28.

retain an adolescent identity by running to Nevada to marry a teenager, he is nonetheless a grown man who will grow older. He cannot arrest time, and his retreat is destined to the same dead end as Callisto's and Sidney Stencil's.

The final state of equilibrium seems near at hand in The Crying of Lot 49. Entropy is the condition of landscape and population alike. Echoing Callisto's foreboding of an imminent heat-death is Mr. Thoth's ominous statement: "'I feel him, certain days, days of a certain temperature . . . and barometric pressure. Did you know that? I feel him close to me'" (Crying, 67). When Oedipa asks if the "him" he speaks of is his grandfather, Thoth replies: "'No, my God'" (Crying, 67). "Days of a certain temperature" refers us back to the short story and brings to mind a panic-stricken Callisto obsessively checking the constant 37° temperature as he awaits the end. Entropy prevails, and in The Crying of Lot 49, Pierce Inverarity is saddled with much blame for hastening the process.

Charles Harris states that Pynchon's second novel "launches a protest against the powers of modern mass society."⁷⁶ Pierce Inverarity has been one of those powers, and he incurs much blame for creating and accelerating the entropic state consuming San Narciso. During his lifetime, Pierce was the mogul and grand advocate of capitalism and

⁷⁶Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd, p. 95.

the consumeristic Madison Avenue madness Callisto decries. Pierce Inverarity, "who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time" (Crying, 1), is, in part, responsible for the reduction of humans from differentiation to sameness, from "ordered individuality to a kind of chaos" (Entropy, 284). As our mechanistic, efficiency-obsessed, rigidly-structured and defined society has no use for the nonconformist or non-productive, Inverarity and those like him have eliminated the possibility of variety through their capitalistic enterprises and have engendered a two-party population composed of those-who-have and those-who-have-not. Those-who-have are the Inverarities and Oedipas. Those-who-have-not are relegated to the Tristero, which Raymond Olderman sees as "a metaphor for the narrow scope of contemporary human possibilities or alternatives."⁷⁷

Inverarity--with his controlling interests in Yoyodyne, Fangoso Lagoons, Beaconsfield Cigarettes, Turkish baths, real estate in Arizona, Texas, New York, Delaware and Florida, Vesperhaven Senior Citizens Home, Tank Theatre, San Narciso College and more--was a fanatic capitalist, consumer-spender. During her affair with him, Oedipa had never understood his maniacal "need to possess, to alter the land, to bring new skylines, personal antagonisms, growth rates into being" (Crying, 134). Pierce had confided that his life's driving ambition was to "keep

⁷⁷ Beyond the Wasteland, p. 145.

things bouncing," and, surveying the situation his monumental efforts have created, Oedipa reflects that "he must have known, writing the will, facing the spectre, how the bouncing would stop" (Crying, 134). As co-executrix of his estate, she has been forced to recognize that the "bouncing" to which Pierce dedicated his life has reduced San Narciso to two mutually exclusive groups.

At a peculiarly enlightening moment in her quest, Oedipa stands on a spot of ground in San Narciso, and the city suddenly "lost . . . gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American continuity of crust and mantle" (Crying, 133); she then realizes what Inverarity and tycoons of his sort have done to America, since, it appears, "San Narciso and the estate were really no different than any other town, any other estate" (Crying, 135). Through his legacy, Pierce has compelled Oedipa, either deliberately or inadvertently, to become aware of the tragic fact that her country is not populated by an immense number of individuals but by two groups--those who can and will conform and those who cannot or will not; he has compelled her to become aware of the dichotomy between the accepted and the exiled.

Standing on that spot of ground in San Narciso, another revelation is forced upon Oedipa, and she is suddenly struck with the knowledge that there is another aspect

of the two groups which define America. Recalling the Henry Miller epigraph from "Entropy," in which our cultural and societal climate is referred to in terms of weather, the sleuth realizes that America's "weather" is characterized by two phenomena: by "storm-systems of group-suffering and need, prevailing winds of affluence" (Crying, 134). The haves and have-nots typify the American scene and form the true continuity which makes San Narciso indistinguishable from any other city in the United States. Pierce's legacy--which is America itself (Crying, 134)--is a mirror legacy; on the surface of it appear the affluence and growth and prosperity which symbolize the possessors, but underneath are the poverty and desperation of the dispossessed who reside within Tristero. Concomitant results of the same legacy, the possessors have everything, while the dispossessed have nothing. Erik Wensberg maintains that "in the name of the Tristero System lies the secret Tristeza, Terror, Hysteria that is the Inverse of Inverarity's 'legacy'."⁷⁸

By means of the legacy which she makes incumbent on herself to decipher, Oedipa is able to descend to the underworld of the dispossessed. Before her Tristero quest, she had been truly aware of only one group, the group to which she, as a middle-class suburban housewife caught up in the

⁷⁸"The Crying of Lot 49," p. 447.

ritual of acquiring things, belongs. With her new knowledge of another social strata existing simultaneously with but separate from her own, she recalls bits of evidence she had previously ignored, incidents which, if she had known then what she knows now, would have indicated the presence of the "storm-systems of need" which exist aside her own "winds of affluence."

Seeing a line of abandoned Pullman cars, she is reminded of "other, immobilized freight cars . . . other squatters who stretched canvas for lean-tos behind smiling billboards along all the highways, or slept in junkyards in the stripped shells of wrecked Plymouths, or even, daring, spent the night up some pole in a lineman's tent like caterpillars" (Crying, 135). She remembers also "drifters she had listened to, Americans speaking their language carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in; and walkers along the roads at night . . . too far from any town to have a real destination" (Crying, 135). The haves and the have nots--into this the citizenry of America has evolved, into two extremes with no interaction between, for the haves exist in surface society, while the have nots are exiled to Tristero, that silent "unsuspected" world.

In America there is a clear schism between those who can meet the buying and selling demands of the marketplace

and those who cannot. In such a capitalistic society, human abilities are commodities as much as goods and products; man himself is a commodity whose worth and identity are commensurate with his economic potential. Charles Harris states: "Since the owner of capital buys labor to produce goods that have a marketable demand, so must the laborer produce in accord with these demands or starve;" he continues that the commodity/man is then forced to regard his life as an investment "which must bring him maximum profit obtainable under existing market conditions. . . . if his particular abilities are not in demand or if a surplus of these abilities exists, he is discarded by the system."⁷⁹

Product commodities and human commodities are devoid of value unless a demand exists, and the current obsession with absolute conformity insures that anyone or anything which deviates from the consumer norm will be eliminated as waste. Those who are able to meet market demands are elevated to affluence; those who are unable are reduced to poverty. Those who have money are able to make more by appealing to consumer demands, thereby widening the gap between the possessors and the dispossessed.

Pondering the inflexible bipartite division, Oedipa remembers that she "had heard all about excluded middles;

⁷⁹Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd, p. 93.

they were bad shit, to be avoided" (Crying, 136). The truth of the statement resounds about her as she stumbles through the San Narciso night, for she perceives that "it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless" (Crying, 136). The ones, in addition to being the accepted and accepting average Americans, are the capitalists and consumers; the zeroes, nonconformist, obsolete and ostracized, are prisoners of poverty. Through the legacy of Pierce Inverarity, states David Cowart, Oedipa Maas is forced to confront every untruth of the American Dream and, in the process, the fact of our societal heat-death; he summarizes:

She discovers America's disinherited--the disgruntled, disillusioned, disaffected, and down-and-out whose existence is usually never even suspected by middle-class citizens like herself, brainwashed by the jingoistic pieties of the fifties. . . . Oedipa is led to know that the American syllogism is somehow fallacious; its middle term--those poor, huddled masses supposedly succored by Opportunity and Freedom--is undistributed. Yet to the average middle-class eye, America presents a surface affluence, outwardly undimpled by discontent or want. Such spurious homogeneity is what Americans need--small wonder that the melting pot is a cherished national myth. To the extent that the dominant American society achieves a kind of pre-packaged, assembly-line sameness, it becomes increasingly cloistered--blind to the existence of variants in the national reality. Homogeneity, however, is no more desirable in a culture than in a heat engine; in

either case it reflects a loss of energy--
high entropy. American society thus courts
its own petty version of heat-death.⁸⁰

Momentarily, Oedipa wonders how this entropical
equilibrinous state has come to pass and asks herself "how
had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good
for diversity?" (Crying, 136). She knows, however, that
she has been party to the passive acceptance which has
initiated the heat-death. With her handsome home in
Kinneret-Among-the-Pines, her weekly sessions with an
unnecessary psychiatrist, her sterile suburban Tupperware-
fondue rituals, her five o'clock cocktails and newly-
modeled Chevy, her color television and her herb garden,
Oedipa Maas, herself a typical conspicuous consumer, is
just as responsible as any Inverarity for what has happened
in her country. She is forced to admit to herself: "This
is America, you live in it, you let it happen. Let it
unfurl" (Crying, 112). Oedipa realizes that she has accepted
and fostered the beliefs and practices which have resulted
in the creation of Tristero; she is to blame for languishing
in her comfortable and secure middle-class Kinneret tower
and passively allowing the dispossessed to suffer and
starve beneath her.

The Tristero dispossessed can do nothing but wait

⁸⁰David Cowart, "Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and
the Paintings of Remedios Varo," Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977),
24-25.

for the computer to go awry, for the rigid absolutes to dissolve, thereby leaving the way open for other alternatives. It seems to Oedipa that all the hobos and drifters she has ever seen roaming America's highways were forever on the move, "searching ceaseless . . . for that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word" (Crying, 136). Those who endure in storm-systems of need await the day when the American capitalistic system runs down and dies, as all closed systems must; their hopes hinge on a new society which will emerge after the death of the present one. They await the arrival of the power of the Virgin--the force of love, imagination and creativity. In that "magical Other" America has denied, in that antithesis of the life-denying and destroying Dynamo, lie their hopes for a land of unlimited possibilities.

Oedipa Maas, meanwhile, encumbered with vexatious perceptions about the Tristero membership, ponders a possible course of action and the future implications for her own life. She considers: "What would the probate judge have to say about spreading some kind of a legacy among them all, all those nameless, maybe as a first installment? Obey. He'd be on her ass in a microsecond, revoke her letters testamentary, they'd call her names, proclaim her through

all Orange County as a redistributionist and pinko, slip the old man from Warpe, Wistfull, Kubitschek and McMingus in as administrator de bonis non and so much baby for code, constellations, shadow legatees" (Crying, 136). With the possibility of an equitable distribution of resources ruled out, Oedipa reflects that, maybe, having become alien to the American society into which she had once fitted so comfortably and securely and believing that whatever remains of truth or meaning in America resides within the Tristero, she, too, may be forced to join the conspiracy membership.

The legacy of Pierce Inverarity has revealed an America surely and steadily deteriorating in the entropical process, an America which can offer "only death and the daily tedious preparations for it" (Crying, 136-37). If there remains only the America which the Inverarities and Maases have shaped, Oedipa's understanding of it insures that "the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia" (Crying, 137). The paranoia into which she is assumed encompasses the Tristero.

In the next chapter it will be seen that the actuality of the Tristero existence becomes an irrelevant and unimportant issue for Oedipa. Having been forced to discover the truth about her country and her own life, Tristero and the quest for its meaning are a necessity for her if she is to avoid total despair and disintegration.

Replacing one world with another, nothing remains to her but Tristero. The paranoia which her quest entails allows her to imbue an absurd death realm with a measure of meaning and order; it allows her the illusions which infuse her actions--an extreme of Meatball's purposeful efforts--with a sense of direction and significance. But Oedipa's paranoid quest is only an alternative of sorts, for, at this stage of contemporary history, all escapes are transitory. There is no hope for the Virgin. Pynchon, like Henry Adams before him and many physicists before them both, believes all attempts to avoid and escape the heat-death to be temporary and ultimately vain. Entropy is irreversible, and America is in the first stages of the final stage.

THE POWER OF PARANOIA: CREATING THE COMFORTING QUEST

"Steppin off of this dirty bus,
first time I've understood.
It's got to be the goin'
not the gettin' there that's good.
That's a thought worth keepin' if I could.
It's got to be the goin'
not the gettin' there
that's good."

--Harry Chapin,
"Greyhound"--

"The Secret Integration" is a loosely-constructed, chronologically-confused story about how and why the children of Mingeborough, Massachusetts, under the able and paranoid leadership of a young genius, organize themselves into Operation Spartacus, a conspiracy bent on undermining the town's adult population. In a series of flashbacks, this humorous and yet pathetically touching short story also reveals how and why a black child, Carl Barrington, comes to be a Spartacan member and how and why he comes, finally, to be dismissed from that membership; as "The Secret Integration" unfolds, it is disclosed that Carl's acceptance into Operation Spartacus is the culminating step in the three-year-old rebellion, a rebellion rejuvenated by a single encounter with another person, Carl McAfee, midway through the conspiracy's existence.

Thematically, "The Secret Integration" is of

considerable importance, for it focuses on topics which re-emerge in various guises throughout the larger works. This many-motifed story touches upon the failures of communication and the dehumanizing tendencies of modern technology. In several poignant scenes, it discloses how the Wasteland comes to be so amply populated and continuously replenished through the insensitivity and intolerance, the structures and strictures of an absolutist adult world which denies for itself and destroys in its offspring a receptiveness to the magical, saving graces natural to children and inherent in the naïve and innocent realm of childhood. In portraying how children, through adult example, are wrenched from a world of color and charm and forced into a bleak, black and white adult reality, "The Secret Integration" leaves the reader with the haunting admonition that, tragically, children will live what they learn.

Of even more crucial relevance to the earlier stories and the novels, this short work rounds out the gamut of responses possible in the face of today's outrageous reality. This is primarily a story about the potential and consequences of paranoia and, comments Joseph Slade, is itself so paranoid it "seems to have been lifted from Gravity's Rainbow, where it left a small hole in the larger narrative."¹ In exploring how paranoia allows one to react to the

¹Thomas Pynchon, p. 40.

Wasteland, "The Secret Integration" concerns itself with the natural by-products of that paranoia: imaginative constructs, which take the shape of conspiracies and plots, and the quest, through which a sense of self and self-worth can be maintained in spite of negative forces which threaten to destroy both. An extreme of the moderate but purposeful action of Meatball Mulligan, the paranoid quest, with its dangers and defects, represents yet another response to the chaos of the contemporary world.

Paranoia, as defined by Hendrik Hertzberg and David McClelland, refers to "a psychosis based on a delusionary premise of self-referred persecution or grandeur . . . and supported by a complex, rigorously logical system that interprets all or nearly all sense impressions as evidence for that premise."² For the insecure, the confused or the non-acclimated person, paranoia is a highly effective defense mechanism, since it "substitutes a rigorous (though false) order for chaos, and at the same time dispels the sense of individual insignificance by making the paranoid the focus of all he sees going on around him."³ Since the paranoid view of reality allows for no random, accidental or inexplicable occurrences, paranoia is a natural response

²Hendrik Hertzberg and David C. K. McClelland, "Paranoia," Harper's, 248 (June, 1974), 51.

³Hertzberg and McClelland, p. 52.

to the confusion of contemporary life.

In "The Secret Integration," Grover Snodd, Mingeborough's mathematical and electrical whiz-kid, a "boy genius with flaws" (SI, 36), suffers from paranoia. An outsider who is unable to make sense of a jumble of random but obviously sinister events, young Snodd is convinced he is the target of a conspiracy of adults, a "they" system, which has set for itself the task of getting rid of him, and from the ordinary occurrences of his daily life, he has pulled together conclusive "evidence" to support his belief.

Grover's first bit of proof that he was indeed the victim of a malicious adult plot came when he was discovered in the shady deal of doing the school kids' homework for a dime an assignment: "They knew somehow (they had a 'curve,' according to Grover, that told them how well everybody was supposed to do) that it was him behind all the 90s and 100s kids started getting. . . . So they went to work earnestly on his parents to talk them into transferring him. Somewhere. Anyplace" (SI, 36). When Grover was subsequently enrolled in a college twenty miles distant and allowed home only on Wednesdays and weekends, he knew then that "the public school had won, had banished him" (SI, 36) and that his own parents had cooperated.

Grover deduced that Mr. Snodd especially had been party to the plot leveled against him due to feelings of

resentment he harbored as a result of a serious argument the two had had concerning the proper foreign policy for Berlin; the consequence of that confrontation was the severance of the father-son relationship and an icy and long-standing non-communication. Interpreting his father's attitude as a deliberate attempt to exclude him from the adult world, Grover complained: "'It isn't that he's stupid, or mean . . . It's worse than that. He understands things that I don't care about. And I care about things he'll never understand" (SI, 36). Denied adult respect and finding that "it wasn't any use talking to people his own age about higher mathematics or higher anything else" (SI, 36), the paranoid outsider was then left to ponder other ominous incidents.

Subsequent events serve to nourish Grover's conviction of an adult/they plot directed against him, the chief being the mysterious appearance of Tom Swift books: "He kept coming across these Tom Swift books by apparent accident, though he had developed the theory lately that it was by design: that the books were coming across him, and that his parents and/or the school were deeply involved. Tom Swift books were a direct affront to him, as if he were expected to compete, to build even better inventions and make even more money on them and invest it even more wisely than Tom Swift" (SI, 39). Further, Grover is certain that through Tom Swift books he is being mentally programmed into

becoming a racist and a snob.

Having thus convinced himself he has been continuously persecuted by grown-ups for no deserved reason and has been ignominiously excluded from the adult world into which, by virtue of sheer intelligence, he should be admitted, Grover Snodd launches his defensive counterattack. He embarks upon a personal quest of waging a retaliatory war against the adult population of Mingeborough, his objective being to harass, confuse and confound the grown-ups and the institutions they represent. The adult/they segment of the town is his perpetual target and continues to be the object of his wrath, his fits of temper and his yelling, which have "something to do with the scaled-up world adults made, remade and lived in without him, some inertia and stubbornness he was too small, except inside himself, to overcome" (SI, 36). Determined to bring down that scaled-up adult world, Grover undertakes the mission of opposing the "they" system with a "we" plot and sets about fashioning and spearheading a conspiracy of his own--the active children's conspiracy of Operation Spartacus.

Older and smarter than the other Mingeborough children and possessed of admirable persuasive abilities, Grover soon gathers about himself several similarly paranoid school children. Manipulating their already-extant discontent and disillusionment, he has little difficulty in convincing them that they, as children, are equally victims of a vicious

adult plot; if their parents are not openly hostile to them, they are, at very least, indifferent. He assumes as his primary task that of exposing the malice and deceptiveness of adults, for "it tickled Grover any time he could interfere with the scheming of grownups" (SI, 39). Under the able direction of Grover Snodd, mastermind with a unique demand for symmetry, timing and coordination, the actively rebellious Operation Spartacus is born, and immediate plans are set in motion for Operation A, "the real uprising of the slaves . . . Abattoir . . . Armageddon" (SI, 43).

Replete with hideout, detailed objectives, weapons, maps and a "list of public enemies, which no one but Grover had access to" (SI, 44), the present Operation Spartacus is organized to the point of a governing body, the Inner Junta; aside from Grover, Tim Santora and Etienne Cherdlu comprise the membership. Tim, through whose eyes all events of the story are seen, has as his area of concern fund-raising and drilling. Fat Etienne Cherdlu, anticipating a lifelong career as a practical joker, signs his name "80N," "usually on telephone poles with 'ha,ha' after it" (SI, 42), and is clearly the most daring of the group: "He took chances nobody else would, letting air out of tires on cop cars, putting on skin diving gear to stir up silt in the creek the paper mill used (which once stopped production for nearly a week), leaving silly and almost meaningless notes signed 'The Phantom' on the principal's

desk while she was out" (SI, 42). Etienne, the most successful proselytizer for the group, considers institutions his special adversaries: "He hated institutions. His great enemies, his jokes' perpetual targets, were the school, the railroad, the PTA" (SI, 42).

Other Spartacans, considered the uneducable of the school, include Hogan Slothrop, "the doctor's kid, who at the age of eight had taken to serious after-bedtime beer-drinking and at the age of nine got religion, swore off beer and joined Alcoholics Anonymous" (SI, 42). Recent initiates are Arnold and Kermit Mostly, "who sniffed airplane glue and stole mousetraps from the store which for fun they would . . . throw at each other" (SI, 42). Of considerable importance is Kim Dufay, "who had a thing about explosive chemical reactions and was responsible for replenishing the cache of sodium up at the hideout, smuggling the stuff out of the Mingeborough High School Lab" (SI, 42), and who, after the failure of Hogan Slothrop, was also given the assignment of PTA infiltrator, which she carries out sporting glaring red lipstick, French-twisted hair and a size 28A padded bra. Nunzi Passarella, "who had begun his career in second grade by bringing somehow a full-grown pig in to Show-and-Tell-Time, a quarter-ton Poland China sow" (SI, 42), had gone on to become founder of the Crazy Sue Dunham cult, "in honor of that legendary and beautiful drifter who last century roamed all this hilltop country exchanging

babies and setting fires, and who, in a way, was the patron saint of all these kids" (SI, 42).

Aside from these core members, the prospect of belonging to such an inspirational group appeals to many other Mingeborough children, especially those at odds with the hostile adult world. Ripe for initiation are several discontented first-graders 80N has rounded up; blessed with admirable throwing arms, they seem ideally suited for the bomb-throwing squad. Other children who are not active Spartacans aid the cause by donating their milk money, contributing eagerly even when it is not their turn; Tim boasts to Grover that "'they're all doing it on their own. They say . . . that they believe in us'" (SI, 43). To the children of Mingeborough, Massachusetts, Operation Spartacus represents a force directed against the most visibly active of their enemies--grown-ups in general.

As "The Secret Integration" opens, Operation Spartacus has been in existence, amid fluctuating successes and failures, for three years. For the first year-and-a-half, the conspiracy's accomplishments consisted of minor acts of rebellion--weekly raids on Mingeborough Park, pilfering and small-scale vandalism, sodium bombs thrown at opportune moments, incessant practical joking and espionage on the adult population. Time not spent on such direct frontal attack was devoted to drilling and practice for Operation A. Yet, encumbered by details and counterattacked

at every turn by a seemingly unassailable adult population, the conspiracy had not progressed as planned and was about to sink under flagging fortunes until the fortuitous events of one day gave it new force and direction. On the very night 80N sabotaged the papermill, Carl McAfee made his abrupt and momentous appearance in Mingeborough.

A flashback reveals that on the night Hogan Slothrop is to top off 80N's papermill sabotage by planting a smoke bomb in the PTA meeting and making off with the minutes and financial statements, he receives a call from his local AA chapter requesting that he visit a stranger in town, apparently an alcoholic in trouble. Accepting the serious assignment and taking Tim along for support, Hogan arrives at the Mingeborough hotel to encounter Carl McAfee, the first black man either of the boys has ever spoken to.

Incensed at the obvious insult, McAfee greets the duo with: "'Well, that's pretty funny. They almost as funny up here as they are in Mississippi'" (SI, 46). Naïve and not understanding that AA has sent Hogan because the adults refused to go, the boys earnestly insist they have come to help, only to have Carl counter: "'You think that's what you're here for? You wrong. . . . I needed help . . . and I thought they would help me. And they really helped, didn't they? Look at what they sent me . . . You're the big jokers in town, now you ought to know a joke when you see one'" (SI, 47). But Hogan and Tim see neither insult

nor joke in the assignment and determine to stay in spite of Carl's protests. Before long, the trio is joined by Grover and a frightened 80N, still garbed in a dripping skin diving suit, who is having second thoughts about his papermill attack, for "it was dawning on him that he'd done something serious, and that the cops, if they got hold of him, would find out about other jobs he'd pulled, and be merciless" (SI, 47).

As McAfee's initial hostility fades in the presence of the boys' sincerity, they, in turn, sensing in the black man a mysterious kinship, begin relating to him some of the conspiracy's lesser achievements, and "soon, because they trusted him, they were also telling him the more secret things--Etienne messing up the paper mill, and the hideout, and the sodium stockpile" (SI, 46). The fraternal feeling is cemented when McAfee admits that he, as a child, had also sabotaged a toilet with sodium. As the night wears on, with McAfee growing progressively more ill and delirious, Hogan, Tim, 80N and Grover discover that the adult plot they believed to be fully concentrated upon them has been directed even more forcefully against their new friend and that, for some unfathomable reason, black is not a good color to be.

After the black man is rudely refused a bottle of liquor by the hotel staff and viciously treated by the bell-boy, he starts to cry, starts "making a noise in his throat, a sound none of them had heard come from a man before" (SI,

47). During their night's vigil with him, the quartet of conspirators learns from incoherent ramblings and bits of personal history that McAfee's cry issues from recurring memories of a missing brother and a vanished girlfriend, childhood gangfights and countless jailcells, vagrancy and persecution, sadness and loneliness, memories of all the things he had tried to forget, things "it was better to forget only how do you?" (SI, 48). Finally, Carl tells them of the woman he loves and desperately begs Tim to reach her by phone; after several attempts, she is located but refuses the collect call, no longer remembering a Carl McAfee, and at that point there comes to Tim and the others "a hint then of how lost Mr. McAfee really was" (SI, 49). How alone and lost he is becomes even more apparent when two policemen arrive and arrest the sick and suffering man for vagrancy, ignoring the children's pleas to find a doctor for him instead.

That one night vigil is the first and last encounter with Carl McAfee; when the boys arrive at the Mingeborough jail the next day, the policemen tell them the black man has been sent to Pittsfield, "and there was no way at all of knowing whether they were telling the truth" (SI, 49). Like so many of the important people in his own life, Carl vanishes from theirs as quickly as he had appeared, but his influence on the boys and the goal of Operation Spartacus is powerful. Carl is to become for the conspiracy the incarnation of the

victimized outsider, the ultimate target of adult cruelty. With the black man serving as symbolic reminder of the malevolence of the adult/they plot, Operation Spartacus finds new purpose and is revived with new force, which is channelled more fiercely than ever against the grown-up world.

A few days after the McAfee meeting, Operation Spartacus successfully completes its most daring mission with an attack on the train. Under the able direction of Nunzi Pasarella and 80N, surplus spotlights covered in green cellophane are rigged up near the railroad cut; as the train approaches, the spotlights are switched on, and twenty-five Spartacans wearing rubber monster masks and homemade monster outfits descend from the slopes. The attack is a terrific success, with the train "coming to a horrible grinding halt, ladies screaming, conductors yelling, Etienne cutting the lights and the kids fleeing away up the sides of the cut and into the fields" (SI, 49). It is a spectacular attack, a clean escape and a highwater mark for Operation Spartacus. Not until the arrival of Carl Barrington is the conspiracy to surpass that night's act of rebellion.

One month previous to the present action of "The Secret Integration," the Barringtons, a black family, move from Pittsfield to Northumberland Estates, the new shopping center-housing development complex in Mingeborough. News of the impending arrival throws the town's adults into

panic; they "suddenly seemed to spend more time talking about the coming of the Barringtons than anything else. They began to use words like 'blockbusting' and 'integration'" (SI, 51), words which, at that point, mean nothing to the children, who think the race issue is "a real race, cars or something" (SI, 42). Intrigued by the parental fear and gossip which rage through Mingeborough, the conspiracy sends Hogan to infiltrate a PTA meeting, where he overhears: "'Well . . . thank God they don't have any children, or there'd be a panic in the PTA, too'" (SI, 51). Subsequent to the meeting, however, the Spartacans discover that their parents are misinformed, that, fortunately, the Barringtons have a child after all.

Spotting the boy one day at Northumberland Estates, the conspiracy members find he, Carl, fits perfectly into the group; a practical joker, he also has "a perfect eye for getting water balloons to splat right on a guy's windshield" (SI, 51). Immediately accepted by the young rebels, Carl becomes an inseparable friend. He goes to school with them every day and sits "quietly in a seat in the corner that had been empty, and the teacher never called on him, though he was as smart as Grover on some things" (SI, 51). When Grover later learns that integration means having black and white children in the same school, the conspirators are proud to boast that they, then, are integrated; unbeknownst to their parents, there is a black

boy in school. Even better, he is their ally.

Rapidly promoted to the Inner Junta, Carl is given the distinguished role of organizer for the Estates, his job being to recruit new members. Completer of the Inner Junta, Carl Barrington is also the culminating glory of Operation Spartacus. When the Mingeborough children accept him into their membership, they commit the ultimate act of defiance and rebellion. Nothing could be more appalling, more abhorrent to their parents, than that "secret integration." But while the conspiracy revels in its crowning achievement, Mingeborough's adult population begins its counterattack.

Immediately after the Barringtons' arrival, all of the hatred and racism latent in the townspeople begins to surface: "Then Tim's and Grover's folks, and even, according to Hogan, the progressive Doctor Slothrop, started in with the telephone calls, and the name calling, and the dirty words they got so angry with kids for using" (SI, 51). As the present action of the story opens, the hate-calls have continued unabated for one month, and Tim Santora hears his own mother, who is crouched down behind the back stairs, whisper viciously into the phone: "'You niggers . . . dirty niggers, get out of this town, go back to Pittsfield. Get out before you get in real trouble'" (SI, 39). Discovered by her eavesdropping son, Mrs. Santora explains with nervous guilt that she is merely playing a practical

joke; Tim, who knows otherwise, walks silently past her to the Inner Junta briefing session, knowing that "she wouldn't give him any trouble now about it, because he'd caught her" (SI, 39).

With Grover, Tim, Carl and 80N assembled, the Inner Junta begins its weekly briefing session. 80N details plans for a second assault on the train along with another sabotage of the boys' latrine and reveals background information on new recruits. Tim reports on money and drilling and requests the use of operational funds to build an elaborate mock-up for the year's dry-run of Operation A. Carl reports on his progress as Northumberland organizer and then reluctantly offers: "'There've been these phone calls . . . Practical jokers'" (SI, 43). To the black boy's confession, 80N, joker par excellence, cries: "'Jokes . . . What's so funny? Call somebody up, call them names, that isn't a joke. It doesn't make any sense at all'" (SI, 43). Equally dumbfounded are Tim and Grover. Carl alone understands.

Unenlightened and vexed over the Barrington situation, the Inner Junta adjourns to the hideout to make decisive plans for revenge; after a day of plotting, it is agreed that Carl will run a time-motion study on letting air out of tires in the shopping center lot, 80N will obtain parts for Grover's newly-invented sodium catapult and Tim will devise limbering-up exercises based on those used by the Canadian Air Force. Finally pleased with the day's

accomplishments, the quartet leaves Operation Spartacus in what should be top working order and decides to call it a day. Arriving at Carl's house, however, they discover that more than another day is over. The counterattack launched by the adults during the Junta's day of planning will prove fatal to Carl Barrington and to Operation Spartacus as well.

Sensing something wrong even before reaching the Barringtons' block, the Inner Junta arrives at Carl's house to find the front lawn completely littered with trash. Initially, the boys are so horrified they can only stand and stare, and, then, "as if compelled to do so, began kicking through it, looking for clues. The garbage was shin-deep all over the lawn, neatly spread right up to the property line. They must have brought it all in the pick-up" (SI, 51). Sifting through the refuse, Tim finds his mother's discarded shopping bags, skins of oranges an aunt had sent as a gift, crumpled envelopes addressed to his father, "all the intimacy of the throwaway part, the shadow-half of his family's life for all the week preceeding . . . ten square yards of irrefutable evidence" (SI, 51). Scanning that same evidence, Grover finds his garbage there, too, along with some donated by the Slothrop and Mostlys and nearly every other family in Mingeborough.

As the boys pick up the trash, they are suddenly interrupted by Mrs. Barrington, who screams from her doorway: "'We don't need your help . . . We don't need any

of you on our side. I thank our heavenly Father every day of my life that we don't have any children to be corrupted by the likes of you trash. Now get out, go on now'" (SI, 51). While she cries, the three confused boys turn away and begin their slow walk home, Tim considering taking a beer can as evidence with which to confront his father but discarding the idea almost immediately, since it would only insure him a hard spanking.

Finally, Grover, Tim and 80N realize that Carl is still with them, and when the black child, "now almost faded into the rain" (SI, 51), asks what he should do now, after this, Grover can only suggest that perhaps it would be better if he were to leave for a while, perhaps go to the hideout; Carl agrees that the old estate will be the best place for him after all and so takes his leave of the Inner Junta, bringing to an end the "secret integration." As Carl runs into the rain, assuring the trio he will be safe at the hideout, the three boys know also that he will:

Everything Carl said, they knew. It had to be that way: He was what grownups, if they'd known, would have called an "imaginary playmate." His words were the kids' own words; his gestures too, the faces he made, the times he had to cry, the way he shot baskets; all given by them an amplification or grace they expected to grow into presently. Carl had been put together out of phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left out at the edges of towns, as if they were auto parts in Etienne's father's junkyard--things they could or did not want to live with but which the kids, on the other

hand, could spend endless hours with, piecing together, rearranging, feeding, programming, refining. He was entirely theirs, their friend and robot, to cherish, buy undrunk sodas for, or send into danger, or even, as now, at last to banish from their sight. (SI, 51)

Carl Barrington is the mental construct of Operation Spartacus; even down to his name, he is the conspiracy's attempt "to resurrect a friend" (SI, 51), Carl McAfee, the exemplary victim of adult injustice and inhumanity. He has been a most potent weapon for the Spartacans, but, like McAfee, he has been destroyed by the even more powerful weapons of the adult world. With Carl Barrington's banishment, Operation Spartacus is brought to an abrupt end.

Although Operation Spartacus is able to enjoy a few minor successes during its three-year existence, inherent in the conspiracy-quest are flaws which insure its ultimate demise. Unbeknownst to the children as they embark upon their quest, the young rebels are, from the outset, contending with adversaries in possession of advantages which will make them invincible: first, they are parents and adults; and second, their actions, which constitute the "they" plot the children believe to be leveled against them, are grounded firmly in the actual. Equipped with these weapons, the grown-ups are never out of control, and Operation Spartacus engages in a losing game in which checkmate is inevitable.

A hint of impending doom for the conspiracy first manifests itself during the second dry-run of Operation A. With lime spread on the grass of Fazzo's Field to designate school walls, the youngest of the rebels carry out an admirable simulated attack until they arrive at the lime outline of the building, at which point they stop abruptly and go no further. Disheartened, Grover later attributes the failure to the fact that "the line figure in the grass might have reminded the little kids of chalk lines on a greenboard" (SI, 43), the kinds of lines which represent an authority they have been taught to respect.

Although the Inner Junta continues its elaborate plotting in spite of the fiasco at Fazzo's Field, a feeling of futility about Operation A begins to emerge, a feeling reminiscent of "dreams you got when you were sick and feverish, where there was something you had been told to do--find somebody important in an endless strange city full of faces and clues; struggle down the long, inexhaustible network of some arithmetic problem where each step lead to a dozen new ones" (SI, 44). For all the briefing and debriefing, plotting and planning, drill and practice, the quest seems never to progress: "Nothing ever seemed to change; no 'objectives' were taken that didn't create a need to start thinking about new ones, so that soon the old ones were forgotten and let slip by default back into the hands of grownups or into a public no man's land again,

and you'd be back where you'd started" (SI, 44). If only at times dimly recognizable to the conspirators, there is "something basically wrong and self-defeating with the plot itself" (SI, 44), and that something, which prevents any real progress and a significant degree of success, is an indisputable adult advantage.

If attainable for flickering moments, "the insecurity and discontent Grover needed and had counted on for dark reasons he never confided would vanish, and everything would be the way it was" (SI, 46). Both are too easily subdued by stronger, more enduring emotions, which are even more powerful than the respect for authority which results in the disaster at Fazzo's Field.

What those emotions are Tim discovers the night he tries so desperately to reach Carl McAfee's old girlfriend by phone; looking at the sobbing man and hearing only silence on the phone line, Tim comes to a realization:

Tim's foot felt the edge of a certain abyss which he had been walking close to--for who knew how long?--without knowing? He looked over it, got afraid, and shied away, but not before learning something unpleasant about the night: that it was night here, and in New York . . . one single night over the entire land, making people, already so tiny in it, invisible too in the dark: and how hard it would be, how hopeless, to really find a person you needed suddenly, unless you lived all your life in a house like he did, with a mother and father. (SI, 49)

Witnessing the stark desolation and utter wretchedness of McAfee, Tim understands that, save for the security and

shelter his parents provide, he, too, could be lost and alone in the night's darkness. To press his rebellion too far could put him dangerously close to the looming abyss.

During the night's vigil with McAfee, Tim begins to realize that the success of Operation Spartacus is destined to be limited due to flaws intrinsic in the campaign itself; he begins to understand that:

something inert and invisible, something they could not be cruel to or betray (though who would have gone so far as to call it love?) would always be between them and any clear or irreversible step, as much as the powdery fiction of the school's outline on Fazzo's Field had stopped the little kids . . . Because everybody on the school board, and the railroad, and the PTA and paper mill had to be somebody's mother or father . . . and there was a point at which the reflex to their covering warmth, protection, effectiveness against bad dreams, bruised heads and simple loneliness took over and made worthwhile anger with them impossible. (SI, 51)

Although Grover and his Spartacans are dedicated to their warfare against the pettiness and maliciousness of adults, they can give vent to their discontent and disapprobation only within certain bounds, which are themselves determined by the very target of their rebellion. By virtue of being parents, the adults of Mingeborough are guaranteed, ultimately, the love and fidelity of their children, and even when those affections are least deserved, they cannot be denied. Although Tim is truly embarrassed by his mother's contemptible action toward the Barringtons, he is nonetheless scarcely able to tell the other Junta members

about the incident "because you were not supposed to tell on your mother" (SI, 42). The bonds of love, loyalty and need by which the rebels of Mingeborough are invisibly attached to their parents are strong, and, although the children strain at those bonds periodically, they cannot, as children, break them.

Further impeding the Spartacan enterprise is the second uniquely adult advantage--control over the weapon of reality; while the actions of the grown-ups are firmly entrenched in the arena of the actual world, those of the conspirators are drawn primarily from the infinitely more fragile world of fiction. Battling the actual with the imaginary is a nearly fruitless endeavor, as Tim Santora realizes at a dry-run of Operation A, when he protests using stakes to represent walls because, even though stakes are better than limestone lines in the grass, they are "'not as good as real walls. Even beaver board ones. Running across a line, making believe it's a door, that's one thing. But you need the door itself. You need real stairs, and real toilets to throw sodium in, you know?'" (SI, 43). For Tim, and for the others as well, "leaving behind two pages of arithmetic homework and a chapter of science he was supposed to read" (SI, 46), if a small act of rebellion, is very real and, therefore, more valid.

Carl Barrington is the most potent Spartacan weapon and the greatest hope for revenge on the adult population.

His acceptance into the conspiracy constitutes the absolute act of defiance and is intended as the culminating blow to old Mingeborough. A symbolic reminder of an old friend, Carl Barrington/McAfee represents the supreme plot, the grandest fiction of the children's creative powers and all the potential for a successful Operation A. Yet, this ultimate Spartacan weapon is still no match for the real weapons of the adults. As the conspiracy's true effectiveness seems always to turn out to be considerably less than the plot (SI, 51), so any fictional Carl and any imaginary "secret integration" Operation Spartacus can devise could never, in the end, be equal to the real counterattacks of vicious phone calls and, finally, the triumph of a lawn strewn with garbage.

When the great hope for Operation A is sent into exile, Tim and 80N question Grover as to whether their integration and, in effect, their rebellion can be maintained, to which Grover, the whiz-kid never at a loss for an answer or explanation, can only respond weakly: "'Ask your father . . . I don't know anything'" (SI, 51). Finally deferring to the adult world against which he has struggled for three years, Grover acknowledges the demise of the rebellion he has spearheaded. As Carl vanishes into the rain, the Inner Junta disbands, the conspiracy disintegrates and each rebel returns "to his own house, hot shower, dry towel, before-bed television, good night kiss" (SI, 51);

each returns to the comforts and securities only parents are able to provide.

Yet, regardless of its predetermined outcome and the element of futility inherent in it, the quest of Operation Spartacus is not without its positive achievements. Contrary to Grover's statement that "'you can't fight the law of averages . . . you can't fight the curve'" (SI, 36), he and his followers, through their Spartacan efforts, prove that, although they cannot triumph over it, they can fight the norm nonetheless. Via their small acts of rebellion, via the mental state their "secret integration" fosters, they are able to give body and substance to the childish indignation the inhumane actions and intolerant attitudes of their parents arouse. If their revolt against the injustices and deliberate cruelties rampant in the grown-up world is to be finally quashed by overpowering forces, the campaign is still an active response rather than a passive acceptance.

Even as the rebellion is quelled, the Mingeborough children carry with them the absolute knowledge that all is not right in the world their parents inhabit, and when, at the end of it all, they return to warm homes, showers and good-night kisses, they must also contend with "dreams that could never again be entirely safe" (SI, 51). If they abandon Carl Barrington, they do so in the face of insurmountable odds and only after his power has been

completely destroyed; that he proves ineffectual as an ultimate weapon does not obliterate the fact that into his making and maintenance goes the greatest sum of energy the conspiracy has to offer. In spite of the final defeat, the Spartacans gain something of great value from their quest against the Mingeborough adult population--the feeling of pride and accomplishment which is derived from dedicated and purposeful action.

Operation Spartacus experiences that same feeling of worth after the success of the daring attack on the train, an assault carried off with the aid of monster outfits and spotlights wrapped in green cellophane. Regarding that crowning achievement, Grover says: "'I feel different now and better for having been green, even sickly green, even for a minute.' Though they never talked about it, Tim felt the same way" (SI, 49). As "The Secret Integration" reveals and as Pynchon is to make clearer in the novels, when confronted with the awesome power of the negative forces which surround us, whether as children or adults, we may have to remold those forces into an identifiable adversary towards which to direct our active, albeit vain, efforts. If the outcome of such a quest is never in doubt, the possibility of achieving "greenness," at least temporarily, is worth the attempt.

In V. and The Crying of Lot 49, the seminal ideas found in "The Secret Integration" explode in dimension. The

paranoia which enables Grover Snodd and the other Mingeborough malcontents to reassemble the random and apparently threatening incidents of their daily lives into a visible adversary which takes the form of an adult conspiracy is but a children's version of the same paranoia which enables Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas to order, derive meaning from and, thereby, come to terms with the confusing and antagonistic agglomeration of forces which is reality this century. Paranoia, which, state Hertzberg and McClelland, has the power "to refashion the objective world, as well as the subjective universe, in its own image,"⁴ manifests itself in the novels through the projection of cabals which span both centuries and continents--an elusive V.-plot and a multifaceted Tristero conspiracy.

Max Schulz has stated: "Some of the most searching art of the sixties is grappling with the nature of a world in which reality consists of arbitrary mental constructs and selfhood of unsought-for relationships."⁵ Clearly writing in this vein, Pynchon, in the sixties and seventies, explores the idea of the reinvented universe, where fictional mental constructs assume an importance and, eventually, a reality of their own. As protective and

⁴"Paranoia," p. 59.

⁵Max F. Schulz, "The Unconfirmed Thesis: Kurt Vonnegut, Black Humor and Contemporary Art," Critique, 12, No. 3 (1971), 18.

defensive measures with which to combat the nightmare of the common twentieth century reality, paranoid fantasy projections allow for pattern and order where none exists, allow explanation for the inexplicable, allow the imposition of a measure of meaning on the meaningless.

Raymond Olderman posits that the appeal of such projections for Wastelanders resides in the fact that through them we can convince ourselves of the "existence of a real metaphysical force, or a real organization, that with its own logic and malicious purpose is controlling the extremes of modern experience. Without some such logic . . . we may be forced to admit that the intricate fate of our century hangs on nothing purposeful, malicious or otherwise."⁶ The latter prospect is too desperate and despair-ridden. If, as James Hall maintains, "imagination can bypass defeatism about a structured, all too predictable reality by building another world where we have not yet learned the rules,"⁷ it can also, as Thomas Pynchon reveals, bypass defeatism about a structureless, maddeningly unpredictable reality by constructing another world in which we invent our own rules. One of those rules, a natural by-product of paranoia, is the quest, the battle for position, significance and meaning in the recreated universe.

⁶Beyond the Wasteland, pp. 136-37.

⁷"The New Pleasures of the Imagination," p. 602.

As the conspiracies in the novels are extremely more intricate and immense than the localized adult/they plot which flourishes in Mingeborough, Massachusetts, so the quests in V. and Lot 49 are infinitely more complex than the small-scale rebellion perpetrated by Operation Spartacus, and as those quests assume a degree of complexity, the intrinsic flaws become blatant. Rapidly acquiring an obsessive nature, the novels' quests demand involvement to the exclusion of all else. They necessitate personal and social isolation, for Pynchon's questers are, to use Richard Poirer's words, manipulated, "self-mystified people running as if on command from the responsibilities of love to the fascination of puzzles and the power of things;"⁸ the quests imply frustration, physical pain and mental deterioration which verges on insanity.

As the quest is a consequence of an imaginary construct, exhaustive effort is required to prevent that self-made reality from shattering into tiny, dissociated bits in the presence of a more powerful actual reality, much as the imaginary Carl Barrington disintegrates in the face of a littered lawn. For the paranoid quester, the reinvented world coheres and is maintained only through tremendous physical and mental torment. Also, as with the Spartacan endeavor, there is in the quests of V. and The Crying of

⁸"A Literature of Law and Order," p. 202.

Lot 49 something which prohibits an ultimate success; that something is an innate refusal to reach completion for fear of being thrust back into the midst of an actual Wasteland.

Yet, if the paranoid quest is a damaging and futile expenditure of physical and mental energy, its very positive elements are immensely alluring. Just as paranoia is comforting for its instantaneous elimination of random, chance and unconnected occurrences and its similarly instantaneous saturation of the meaningless with meaning, so the quest is valuable for the quality of existence it permits. It allows for a sense of purpose and direction and a feeling of vitality; it adds a dimension which insures for the quester the option of personal survival and the impression of self-worth. The quest is an active response to the Wasteland; James E. Miller terms it "the defiant assertion of one's humanity in the face of overwhelming forces that dehumanize and destroy."⁹ As such, the paranoid quest, the state of being "green," represents another way to combat the twentieth century Wasteland.

⁹Quests Surd and Absurd, p. 17.

II

In his pre-quest days, Herbert Stencil, son of Sidney Stencil and a mother about whom he knows nothing, spent a large share of his life on the minimum threshold of existence, enduring passively and spasmodically a jumble of meaningless jobs: "He didn't freeload all the time: he'd worked as a croupier in southern France, plantation foreman in East Africa, bordello manager in Greece; and in a number of civil service positions back home" (V., 43). Pre-V., Stencil cherished inactivity, and "before 1945 he had been slothful, accepting sleep as one of life's major blessings" (V., 43). To occupy his dulled consciousness between periods of work and sleep--time spans he would in retrospect call "kingdoms of death"--he would idly thumb through the journals he inherited from his father.

With the outbreak of war, Herbert began to sense inexplicable feelings of anxiety and dread; perhaps he was beginning to realize how close to inanimacy the kingdoms of death were luring him, for in 1939 shadowy warning signals began to urge him to activity, and "it was as if a stranger, located above the frontiers of consciousness, were shaking him. He didn't particularly care to wake; but realized that if he didn't he would soon be sleeping alone" (V., 43). To redeem himself from lethargy, he volunteered for war duty in North Africa, where he saw enough death and

destruction to last a lifetime. Discharged, Stencil found himself confronted with a return to death kingdoms; the prospect was appealing, and he "flirted with the idea of resuming that prewar sleepwalk" (V., 43-44). Fortunately--and unfortunately--V. then made her abrupt appearance in Herbert Stencil's life.

In 1945, Herbert Stencil becomes the copy of his father; his legacy is the quest for V.. While randomly perusing Sidney's journals, Stencil espies the passage which transforms him from passive inanimate to purposeful quester. Under the heading "Florence, April, 1899," he reads: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what she is. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report" (V., 43). This short passage offers Stencil the excuse he needs to prompt him into a pursuit which will occupy the rest of his years.

Initiated and endured for reasons he only vaguely comprehends, the quest for V. provides Herbert with an alternative to the post-war Wasteland world which threatens to overwhelm him. The quest allows him purpose and direction, allows him to recreate the world and reshape reality into something which is meaningful. The V. conspiracy and the paranoia which is inherent in it insure for Stencil a life of activity and an escape from the inanimate kingdoms of death.

However, the quest offers activity bought at great cost. In his relentless pursuit of the mysterious Lady, Stencil becomes isolated, cut off from everyone and everything unable to provide clues or leads. Resorting to impersonation and disguise, he is self-humiliated and self-alienated. Since the quest, by virtue of being a saving quest, must remain unfulfilled, Stencil acquires activity at the expense of peace and personal safety; if he purchases animacy, he gains in the bargain frustration and vexation. For Herbert, however, the sacrifices are overshadowed by the benefits, and, as time passes, the quest for V. becomes essential to his life. If V.'s world is tinged with threats of Apocalypse, the world without her is too random and meaningless to be endured.

To rationalize a pursuit which, while an imperative for him, appears as pure insanity to others, Stencil formulates several theories. To his friend Margravine he postulates: "'It may be that Stencil has been lonely and needs something for company'" (V., 44). When Benny Profane, to whom such concerted and active dedication is the height of folly, asks why Stencil initiated his quest, the sleuth replies: "'Why not? . . . His giving you any clear reason would mean he'd already found her. . . . in this search the motive is part of the quarry. Stencil's father mentioned her in his journals: this was near the turn of the century. Stencil became curious in 1945. Was it boredom, was it that

old Sidney had never said anything of use to his son; or was it something buried in the son that needed a mystery, any sense of pursuit to keep active a borderline metabolism?" (V., 361-62). Perhaps there are other reasons,¹⁰ but one of the most important hinges on the necessity of maintaining that "borderline metabolism."

Just prior to his discovery of V., Stencil vaguely

¹⁰A majority of critics have stated that in pursuing V., Herbert Stencil is pursuing his mother, asserting that he searches for the Lady because she is his mother. Although V. is many things and could be almost anything, a close examination of the novel will not support deductions that she is Stencil's mother and, therefore, the motivating force behind his quest. In a conversation with Margravine, Stencil states emphatically to the woman's questions about V.: "'You'll ask next if he believes her to be his mother. The question is ridiculous'" (43). It certainly seems ridiculous, for it must be remembered that Sidney's first and only encounter with V., until the 1919 meeting on Malta, took place in Florence in April of 1899. Herbert was born in 1901, necessitating an extremely unlikely two-year pregnancy for V. if she is to be his mother. Also, when Sidney is on Malta in 1919 and observing the Carla-Fausto-V. triangle, he is reminded of another long-ago triangle. Prompted by Carla's pleas for information about Fausto's "other woman," Stencil is forced to reflect: "He was tempted to tell her. But was restrained by the fine irony. He found himself hoping that there was indeed adultery between his old 'love' and the shipfitter; if only to complete a cycle begun in England eighteen years ago, a beginning kept forcibly from his thoughts for the same period of time. Herbert would be eighteen" (460). The implication is that the cycle begun in England included his wife and another man; the completion of that circle, the retribution to which Stencil seems somewhat receptive, would manifest itself in this wife assuming the victim-role which was once Sidney's, with Carla being deserted by her husband as Stencil was by his wife. The word "adultery" in the passage above clearly implies that Stencil was married. Although V.'s lovers are numerous, there is nowhere in the novel evidence that she was, at any time, a wife to anyone, including Sidney.

comprehends that if he does not forsake his penchant for sleep, he will succumb to it for good and all; inertness poses a real threat to his life, which is valueless and meaningless, comprised as it is of a series of empty, repetitious rituals of sleep and work. V., whom Stencil seems deliberately to have discovered and assigned utmost importance in 1945, offers an avenue of escape. As Max Schulz states, when man needs a sense of purpose in life, he must simply reinvent himself and his universe.¹¹ This is precisely what Stencil accomplishes with V.. By recreating himself, by becoming a quester in a reinvented world which centers around V., he is prevented from lapsing into inertness.

From the moment he encounters the passage on V., Stencil begins "a conscious campaign to do without sleep" (V., 43), and even "a month was too long to stay in any city unless there were something tangible to investigate" (V., 45). When he undertakes his quest, Stencil discovers motion and a purposeful direction for it: "His random movements before the war had given way to a great single movement from inertness to--if not vitality, then at least activity" (V., 44). By tracking his mysterious Lady throughout the world's cities, Stencil is able to escape the dangers of inertia. Like questers in many recent novels,

¹¹"The Unconfirmed Thesis," p. 14.

like Oedipa Maas who will follow him, in a short while, Stencil "has become not only adapted to motion, but addicted to it . . . Motion is his metaphor for vitality."¹² V., in her multiple disguises, manifestations and locations, redeems Stencil, for by following her "inevitable looped trail" (V., 209) he acquires a lifetime of activity.

No less important than providing Stencil with animacy, V. also offers him a life and a world fraught with meaning. V., as woman or force, constitutes the one reality Stencil can comprehend; she explains the Wasteland and defines the facts of Herbert's existence. A V. conspiracy is the only way Stencil can make understandable the absurdity of contemporary life.

Immediately previous to his discovery of the crucial passage, Stencil had been sickened by the killing and destruction he witnessed in Africa. In 1945, the year his quest begins, the United States unleashed the horror of the Atomic Bomb; shortly after ensued the hysteria of the McCarthy hearings. V. assumes paramount importance during the historical times Max Schulz calls a "paradigm of nothingness," during the "Dulles-Eisenhower years of brinkmanship--Communist Conspiracy, Cold War, Domino Theory, and Atom Bomb Threat."¹³ The world, it seems, has been capsized

¹²Hall, p. 602.

¹³Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties, p. 78.

by mass violence, unprecedented depravity, paranoia and chaos. By crowning V. both cause and symptom, Stencil is able to invest all of the riot, irrationality and randomness with meaning and design, for, as Raymond Olderman suggests, "what better explains the fabulous direction contemporary fact has taken, the mystery of absurdity, and the threat of annihilation--what better explains the loss of man's coveted virtú than the existence of some usurping power symbolized, aptly, by the letter V. and meaning not individual excellence, but wide-scale, untouchable, metaphysical Conspiracy?"¹⁴

John Hunt offers that through V. and the conspiracy she implies, Stencil is able to see the world about him explained as "the product of an ominous and appalling force in human affairs, a force that promises an ultimate annihilation of the human world and its complete replacement by the inanimate. It is not simply a vision of death and destruction, but a ravaging of all meaning, an emptying of all significance in the human enterprise, the coming of a Nameless Horror, a horror not even bestial but insensible. It is, of course, in Victoria's personal history that he sees this most clearly."¹⁵ V., if elusive, becomes for Stencil the specific reason for what he sees and experiences

¹⁴Beyond the Wasteland, p.127.

¹⁵"Comic Escape and Anti-Vision," p. 104.

in the world. If she causes and progressively intensifies the terror and absurdity, she also gives it a name and an identity. Faced with a choice between a phantasmagoric, helter-skelter, violent world which makes no sense from any vantage point and a nefarious plot which absolutely explains the nature of that world, Stencil chooses V.. With her conspiracy he can impose order and coherence on the facts of his life; without her he must submit himself to random events which are empty of logic.

For Stencil, V. has created and rules over the Wasteland. That she is partially or totally fictional--a willed mental construct--is of no consequence. If she is illusion, she is a necessary illusion. In order to maintain animacy, a meaningful existence and his sanity in a meaningless universe, Stencil must maintain the existence of V., and the only way he can do so is through a projection of his own desires, through a willful and arbitrary exercise of the imagination.

That the V. conspiracy is Herbert Stencil's fabrication, Pynchon leaves no doubt. Her plot and her history are largely, if not totally, Stencil's creation, and, Roger Henkle comments, they reveal Pynchon's fascination "with the notion that in re-creating the past we so distort it that it becomes our own fiction and with the idea that . . . our artifices have a reality as meaningful to us as any

objectively verifiable event would have."¹⁶

In this first novel, Stencil's artifices become reality; V. is his reality. Yet, he never meets the Lady and has no first-hand knowledge of her. Very early in the book, it becomes clear that Stencil is not at all disconcerted by this predicament. With no evidence absolutely concrete and impeachable, he is free to mold and shape, create and destroy, invent at will and as necessity requires. Perhaps for this reason, "Stencil would rather depend on the imperfect vision of humans for his history. Somehow government reports, bar graphs, mass movements are too treacherous" (V., 364). Perhaps, too, they would conclusively deny the existence of V. or too precisely define her character or too definitely specify her location. Stencil can afford none of these. He has created a vital world in which the mystery of V. is essential; to shatter the mystery would dissolve the world.

As early as Chapter Three, the extent to which Stencil's reality is actually fabrication becomes clear. The Porpentine chapter, which occurs in Alexandria in 1898 and centers on the demise of a spy, an eighteen-year-old Victoria Wren and the Fashoda Crisis, is prefaced by the statement that Stencil had "only the veiled references to Porpentine in the journals. The rest was impersonation and

¹⁶"Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," p. 208.

dream" (V., 52). In great detail Stencil concocts a theory of what may have taken place in 1898, three years before his own birth, by projecting himself mentally into the roles and minds of people who could have witnessed the events. Fashioning himself as spectator, he assumes, in turn, the identities of P. Aieul, café waiter and amateur libertine; Yusef, the anarchist; Maxwell Rowley-Bugge, vaudeville entertainer-turned-beggar; Waldetar, a train conductor; Gebrail, tour guide and taxi-driver; Girghis, mountebank and burglar; Hanne, the barmaid; and, finally, the invisible voyeur, perhaps merely a vantage point on the floor. The people, the conversations, the events are Stencil's creation and have only the reality and substance that he, as impersonator, is able to infuse.

Before reconstructing V.'s next adventure, the 1899 Florentine episode revolving around Vheissu, Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," a Venezuelan conspiracy and Victoria Wren, Stencil is forced to admit to Dudley Eigenvalue, his confidant, that, actually, he knows little of V.; he concedes that "'she's yielded him only the poor skeleton of a dossier. Most of what he has is inference'" (V., 140). Information about her activities in Paris in 1913, when V. falls in love and engages in a lesbian/fetish relationship which results in a ballerina's death, is gathered years after the fact from composer Porcépic--pervert, hashish-smoker, Satan-worshipper--an informant of dubious credibility. That the

1913 incident can be recounted in such minute detail necessitates that Porcépic was privy to V.'s most intimate thoughts and actions and is himself in possession of an incredibly accurate memory or that Stencil is once again fictionalizing. That he really learns nothing at all from Porcépic is very likely, for he can project himself backwards in time with facility. In September of 1956, walking the deserted streets of New York with Benny Profane, Stencil becomes restless. As easily as deciding it will be so, Stencil says: "'It is 1913'" (V., 368). And for Stencil, it is 1913, Paris, summer, and he is there with Melanie and Lady V..

Similarly, the complex Mondaugen story, concerning the 1922 Bondel uprising in South-West Africa and including participants Lieutenant Weissmann, Vera Meroving and Hedwig Vogelsang, is told to Stencil in 1956 by Kurt Mondaugen (who was in a feverish, hallucinatory state during most of the events he recounts). The complete story, plus later questioning by Stencil, takes no more than thirty minutes. Yet, when Herbert later retells it to Dentist Eigenvalue, "the yarn had undergone considerable change: had become, as Eigenvalue put it, Stencilized" (V., 211). After listening to part of the extremely exact and very involved story Mondaugen has supposedly related to Stencil, the dentist interrupts: "'I only think it strange that he should remember an unremarkable conversation, let alone in that

much detail, thirty-four years later. A conversation meaning nothing to Mondaugen but everything to Stencil'" (V., 231). Stencil, in a moment of honesty, is forced to admit that much of the Mondaugen tale is serendipity (V., 231).

In fact, most and maybe all of what Stencil "knows" about V. is serendipity. Her history may be complete fiction, for every person, place and incident with which he links the Lady is surrounded by "a nacreous mass of inference, poetic license, forcible dislocation of personality into a past he didn't remember and had no right in, save the right of imaginative anxiety or historical care, which is recognized by no one" (V., 51).

Eigenvalue, who is subjected to Stencil's incessant yarning about the ubiquitous V.-plot, neither understands the quester's preoccupation with the past nor believes in the possibility of conspiracy; he reflects: "Cavities in the teeth occur for good reason . . . But even if there are several per tooth, there's no conscious organization there against the life of the pulp, no conspiracy. Yet we have men like Stencil, who must go about grouping the world's random caries into cabals" (V., 139). The dentist scoffs at Stencil's stories of V., remarking to the harried man: "'In a world such as you inhabit, Mr. Stencil, any cluster of phenomena can be a conspiracy'" (V., 140). What Eigenvalue fails to realize is that in the world Stencil inhabits, such phenomena must be a conspiracy, for only in that

manner is Herbert able to order events which would otherwise overwhelm him.

If reality for Stencil is willfully distorted, it is nonetheless the only reality to which he can remain relevant. The actuality and accuracy of V.'s past history and current activities are unimportant. As Jerry Bryant explains: "The episodes he shapes out of his evidence--which form his account of the past--are pictures that result from guesses, models of a reality he can never know fully, rather than reproductions of the reality that once throbbed with life. . . . For Stencil the pictures begin to be more important than the past itself."¹⁷ The pictures which, on the strength of Stencil's liberal and desirous imagination, fit together so neatly into a grand conspiracy collage can in no way be documented by fact, and Stencil himself knows that V. and her plot have been arbitrarily fashioned from "the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects" (V., 419). Nonetheless, she is a necessary illusion, and Stencil is an "architect-by-necessity of intrigues and breathings-together" (V., 209). He must continue searching, compiling, discarding, shuffling through "this grand Gothic pile of inferences he was hard at work creating" (V., 209).

That V. is vital to Stencil is evidenced in the

¹⁷The Open Decision, p. 256.

compulsive quality of his quest. Over the years, the conspiracy he seeks develops into a haunting and tormenting obsession which exacts both a physical and mental toll. That he continues pursuit in spite of the mental anguish that pursuit entails reveals how necessary his V.-quest is.

At age fifty-four, the harried Stencil looks seventy (V., 140), and his chase, "far from being a means to glorify God and one's own godliness . . . was for Stencil grim, joyless; a conscious acceptance of the unpleasant for no other reason than that V. was there to track down" (V., 44). His quest, however unpleasant, is a deliberately-chosen one, for Stencil "works for no Whitehall, none conceivable unless . . . the network of white halls in his own brain;" his task is self-imposed and, therefore, "the lunacy of any self-appointed prophet" (V., 42). Concisely, Herbert Stencil's quest for V. is a "simple-minded, literal pursuit . . . For no one's amusement but his own" (V., 50).

Although Stencil realizes, at least partially, that his search is futile activity, he cannot abandon it; Tony Tanner states that "such self-knowledge does not obviate the need to pursue the phantom he has at least half-created. The book recognizes that such fantasies may be necessary to maintaining consciousness and purposive motion."¹⁸ Stencil's quest is necessary to maintain a world and a self,

¹⁸City of Words, p. 164.

and, if it has grown into something no longer amusing, it is obsessive, for "as spread thighs are to the libertine, flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production machinist, so was the letter V. to young Stencil" (V., 50). It is an obsession which was acquired slowly and surely without Stencil's full realization (V., 209), and it is a quest which defines and identifies him. To his acquaintances, even to himself, Herbert Stencil is "quite purely He Who Looks for V." (V., 210). And look for V. he does, everywhere throughout the world except in the most logical of places. For good reason, Stencil avoids the city of Valletta on Malta.

Throughout the years of his pursuit, Stencil has not been able to bring himself to search for his quarry on the island where old Sidney died; an obvious V.-figure and the one most natural for exploration, the capital city of Malta frightens him. As the novel unfolds, Stencil reveals that he avoids Valletta for good reason; Valletta is the one place wherein he is most likely to meet V..

Through conversations and internal ramblings, it becomes clear that Stencil's anxiety over the island of Malta is based on two possibilities. He fears that he may meet V. there and die physically, as it appears old Stencil met her and died. This reason carries some weight, for Stencil has often, and without success, "tried to tell himself meeting V. and dying were separate and unconnected for

Sidney" (V., 362). He is never able to ignore the possibility of connection.

Further, Stencil fears that in Valletta he will finally find V., whether alive or dead, and be forced to realize the end of his quest and, therefore, life as he knows it. John Hunt summarizes: "In the pursuance of his quest, Stencil acquires a fulfilling sense of animateness. But with the prospect of ending the quest, of making the connections, comes an apocalyptic vision of an absolute threat to life. The threat is not simply from death which, metaphorically, would be right enough, but from the takeover of the inanimate that promises to reduce the whole human enterprise to something utterly meaningless."¹⁹

Although Herbert has tracked V. for years, he has never intended to finally catch her, and, as David Richter says, "we are allowed from the first to see V. as something that must be sought but must not be found."²⁰ It is the self-imposed quest which has brought a comforting reality and a cherished sense of vitality and purpose. The quester knows completion will destroy everything and plunge him back into the Wasteland. Therefore, he must not solve V.'s riddle: "Finding her: what then? Only that what love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward,

¹⁹"Comic Escape and Anti-Vision," pp. 110-11.

²⁰Fable's End, p. 105.

toward this acquired sense of animateness. Having found this he could hardly release it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid" (V., 44). And the approach-and-avoid strategy works well for eleven years as Herbert traverses the world and fashions a mammoth conspiracy from clues he gathers and inferences he creates. It works well until he realizes the clues he needs are to be found on Malta.

In 1956, Stencil realizes that he can no longer approach if he continues to avoid. With leads growing too tenuous, he finds himself less than active, existing on the threshold of "a certain vegetation" (V., 209), talking with Eigenvalue, who knows nothing of V., and waiting for Paola Maijstral to reveal how she fits into the scheme of things. After Paola gives him Fausto's Confessions, Stencil is forced to admit that New York has become as threatening as Valletta, so it must be Malta at last: "He could go to Malta and possibly end it. He had stayed off Malta. He was afraid of ending it; but, damn it all, staying here would end it too. Funking out; finding V.; he didn't know which he was most afraid of, V. or sleep. Or whether they were two versions of the same thing" (V., 324). The panic-stricken Stencil has, finally, no choice in the direction his quest must take; he screams at Profane, whom he has

cajoled into going with him for moral support, perhaps protection: "'How does he know what he'll do once he finds her. Does he want to find her? They're all stupid questions. He must go to Malta'" (V., 362). And go to Malta he does.

Once in Valletta, however, Stencil reverts to the customary avoidance technique. Knowing that Fausto Maijstral has first-hand knowledge of V., or of the Bad Priest, whom Stencil believes to have been V. in disguise, he procrastinates, waits one day and then puts off his visit until "after a morning-long argument with the whiskey bottle which the bottle lost" (V., 418). When Herbert finally does converse with Maijstral about the Lady, he does so "with a voice always threatening to break, as if now at last he were pleading for his life" (V., 418). It is his life he pleads for since V. is the entirety of his existence, and Fausto threatens to destroy that existence by maintaining that the person Stencil seeks is dead, long-buried under a pile of rubble.

Ignoring Fausto's remarks about V.'s death, Stencil begs for clues--the location of the cellar in which the Priest was buried, her comb, glass eye, the names of children who knew her. When Maijstral can offer nothing to encourage further pursuit, Stencil cries: "'She cannot be dead . . . One feels her in the city'" (V., 421). If Fausto is telling the truth, V. was dead before Stencil

began his search. That there is no V., that there is no conspiracy and, therefore, nothing to pursue Stencil refuses to believe; for his sanity, for his very existence, it cannot be so. He confides to Maijstral: "'Did you know, he's devised a prayer. Walking about this city, to be said in rhythm to his footsteps. Fortune, may Stencil be steady enough not to fasten on one of these poor ruins at his own random or at any least hint from Maijstral. Let him not roam out all Gothic some night with lantern and shovel to exhume an hallucination, and be found by the authorities mud-streaked and mad, and tossing meaningless clay about'" (V., 421). Fausto's account of V. threatens to destroy Stencil and his world; to prevent that, the quester simply decides: "Stencil doesn't think he believes him any longer" (V., 423) and goes elsewhere to find leads to track.

Unfortunately, Stencil's other sources can contribute nothing promising. A Valletta woman, possibly a participant in the Bad Priest's dismemberment and rumored to be the owner of the glass eye, refuses to help. Father Avalanche, a contemporary of V.'s and a Malta resident since 1919, is too old to remember anything of value. Try as Stencil may to goad Avalanche into a conversation about the June Disturbances, which old Stencil was investigating just previous to his death, the aged priest's failing memory will not cooperate. Only the mention of Father Fairing, his predecessor, offers a gleam of hope to Herbert, who

begins to sense, by necessity, the recurrence of the same old "ominous logic" which denotes conspiracy.

Encouraged by Father Avalanche's information, the quester explains to Profane: "'Stencil came on Father Fairing's name once, apparently by accident. Today he came on it again, by what only could have been design'" (V., 424). When a feverish Profane rambles incoherently about Fairing's New York City sewer parish, nights on the Alligator Patrol and the time he had hunted, cornered and killed a strange alligator in a peculiarly-lit section of the sewer, Stencil is rejuvenated, thrust instantly into the depths of a reviving paranoia and off again world-creating. Since Stencil himself was shot in that area of the sewer, it follows--logically to Stencil--that V. is alive in 1956 and in full possession of Profane's soul. V. and her conspiracy alive and out to get Stencil! The possibilities for paranoia are limitless, and, imbued with new life and energy, the sleuth is off again on his V.-hunt. Two days later, Stencil is gone from Malta, leaving behind only a note for Fausto:

A shipfitter named Aquilina has intelligence of one Mme. Viola, oneiromancer and hypnotist, who passed through Valletta in 1944. The glass eye went with her. Cassar's girl lied. V. used it for an hypnotic aid. Her destination, Stockholm. As is Stencil's. It will do for the frayed end of another clue. Dispose as you will of Profane. Stencil has no further need for any of you. Sahha. (V., 425)

Sahha to Stencil. The word, meaning both hello and

goodbye, describes him. He will spend his life coming and going, leaving and arriving, assimilating those bits of information which contribute to his V.-world and discarding those which do not--all in order to keep active the search which allows him to remain continuously "green." But Herbert Stencil purchases his "greenness," his meaningful world and energizing motion, at great personal cost.

At the very least, the V.-hunt renders Stencil a foolish-looking figure. For the sake of his compulsive quest, he resorts to all manner of humiliating activity. He finds himself "wearing clothes that Stencil wouldn't be caught dead in, eating foods that would have made Stencil gag, living in unfamiliar digs, frequenting bars or cafés of a non-Stencilian character; all this for weeks on end" (V., 51). Although he has inherited fully his father's obsession with the Dark Lady and the ominous Situation she creates, as well as his desperate need to pursue her, Herbert has not inherited his father's ability or essential dignity. Sidney was an old campaigner with an instinct for espionage and the virtù necessary to play the Game with skill and dignity. Carl Hartman observes that, operating in the nineteenth century, "old Stencil's equipment included a sensitivity to 'plots' and espionage, a keen awareness of the danger of 'those who watch the cafés,' of the certain existence of the 'cabal that must exist in the century'. These impulses, however ridiculous, had a professional

application."²¹ If senior Stencil's instincts were paranoid and fatuous, they were appropriate and compatible with a world which could appreciate them.

Stencil fils has inherited his father's paranoia but neither his world nor his aptitude for espionage and certainly not his essential dignity. Herbert has too much of the schlemihl in him to successfully assume the role of super-sleuth: "He wished it could all be as respectable and orthodox as spying. But somehow in his hands the traditional tools and attitudes were always employed toward mean ends; cloak for a laundry sack, dagger to peel potatoes; dossiers to fill up dead Sunday afternoons; worst of all, disguise itself not out of any professional necessity but only as a trick, simply to involve him less in the chase, to put off some part of the pain of dilemma on various 'impersonations'" (V., 50-51). Stencil's penchant for impersonation and disguise, besides assuring that he appears a fool, also contributes to his growing self-alienation.

The more Herbert knows, or thinks he knows, of V., the less he knows of Herbert Stencil. His irrational chase tactics and the obsessive quality of his quest result in an estrangement from self. Don Hausdorf states: "Totally devoted to his aimless but imperative quest, Stencil is self-alienated; he is a depersonalized adventurer, the 'century's

²¹"The Fellowship of the Roles," p. 74.

child,' almost built into the model (stencilized?) of Henry Adams, and his third-person approach to himself."²² Those who know Stencil, and Stencil himself, ultimately assign him the most telling and descriptive identity possible; over the years, the man has emerged simply as He Who Looks for V., and Tony Tanner believes this definition "may mean that he is in fact a vacancy, filled in with the colours of his obsession, not a self, but in truth a stencil."²³ As Herbert suffers this loss of self and becomes an object of sorts to himself--a human machine whose sole function is to search for the mysterious woman--he must necessarily become estranged from everything not connected with that woman.

Stencil's quest prevents him from engaging in more human endeavors. So completely does V. possess him that he has no time and no desire to cultivate personal relationships. He has no real friends and no romantic involvements and initiates contact with only those people who can feed his V.-addiction. As Stencil's alienation from the human population reveals and as Richard Poirer has commented, participation in self-constructed fictional plots precludes participation in the more human plots of love and friendship.²⁴ Herbert himself recognizes the precariously

²²"Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," p. 263.

²³City of Words, p. 164.

²⁴"A Literature of Law and Order," p. 202.

alienating nature of his pursuit and can foresee a time when it will be "he and V. all alone, in a world that somehow had lost sight of them both" (V., 44). In order to stave off that total isolation as long as possible, Stencil is given to compulsive yarning about V. to anyone who will listen and "that way had left pieces of himself--and V.--all over the western world" (V., 364). Nonetheless, he has no genuine interest in anyone who cannot serve his purposes, and, as he readily admits, the only feelings of love he experiences are directed inward, reserved for the sense of animacy which enables him to continue the chase.

Stencil's devotion to that chase entails additional dangers. With V. serving as the entirety of his world, he is completely oblivious to actual reality. The quest demands that he remain immersed in the past, and such immersion prohibits real involvement with the present. In his search for meaning and significance, Stencil is sealed off from currency. As Tanner indicates, in many ways he is "a stencil with a hothouse mind," and "like a stencil he will admit no configurations of experience that cannot be shaped into the pattern of his fantasy."²⁵ Thus, in some respects, Herbert Stencil is as isolated from the present as he is from himself and others, and all for the sake of a quest which can never be fully realized.

²⁵City of Words, p. 164.

For eleven years, Stencil has pursued a woman or force he can never comprehend. The plot he believes to be of V.'s making is imaginary. She as an entity is non-existent, for throughout the novel the author makes it very clear that her appearances are not manifestations of a conspiracy but random, chance events; Pynchon states: "V.'s is a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth" (V., 423).

In order to narrow V. down almost within the range of comprehensibility, Stencil has assigned her the role of artificer of the Situation, the grand Cabal which has existed in the past and continues alive in the present, as well as cause and queen of the Wasteland. But the Situation/plot he seeks to solve the mystery of is only the product of his own need to see events ordered into a context of logic, however paranoid that logic may be. The repeated assertion of the opening sentence from Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus--that "the world is all that the case is"--negates the Situation, "repudiates the very notion of plots, and arguably leaves things and events standing in precisely describable inexplicability."²⁶ There is no plot; there is only Herbert Stencil enacting a desperate desire to see things infused with an ominous logic rather than bereft of meaning or cause, as is actually the

²⁶Tanner, p. 169.

case. In searching for V. and in attempting to unearth the secrets of the Situation, Stencil seeks a phantom. Similarly, his efforts to assign V. an identity, to pinpoint who or what she is, are ludicrous, for, representing past history and present reality, she is too multiple to be ordered or understood and too many things to be anything at all.

Stencil's quarry is, as he discovers, Valletta, a bar called the V-note, Victoria Wren, Venus as goddess and planet, Hedwig Vogelsang, the Ponte Vecchio, Veronica the rat and Veronica Manganese, Vesuvius, Venezuela, Vheissu and the Vatican, Voce del Popolo, Queen Victoria and Vera Meroving, the mons veneris and vas deferens, Violet and Viola, the V-2 or vergeltungswaffe zwei; she is velocity and vanity, violation and voyeurs, the vanquished and vassalage, the Virgin and virtú, V-E Day and the Vedas, violence and venality, vaudeville, variability and volcanoes. V. is V-ness and is too many things to be anything objectifiable or recognizable to the intellect.

V. represents the multiplicity of reality; she is the past which cannot be absolutely comprehended and the present which is absurdity. The letter V., states Bryant, "embodies the elusiveness of the identification of intellectual explanation and subjective experience;"²⁷ it

²⁷The Open Decision, p. 255.

designates the multiplicity, variability and uncertainty of life, which resists impositions or order. Frederick Hoffman asserts that in attempting to assign any identity to the Lady V., who has many shifting identities, Stencil enacts "a self-defeating counter-activity of making all identities the same. The result of all this is cross-purpose: identities blend, confuse, and clash; the search for identity is itself so exaggerated as to become futile and ludicrous."²⁸ By making V. everything, Stencil ultimately makes her nothing; his quest to understand who or what she is is vain, for she cannot be known.

With such being the case, is Stencil's approach to the Wasteland any more viable than Cleanth Siegel's or Dennis Flange's or Callisto's? Clearly, the response has many dangers and defects. Stencil is less than a caring human individual. He is alienated and isolated, tormented and obsessed. His actions are impotent. He may be a fool. Can his pursuit of V., then, be considered a valid alternative?

Because Herbert Stencil's method of coping with the Wasteland reality is an active response, it is a valid one. In all cases, Pynchon approves the active rather than the passive. Unlike Flange and Callisto, who, by attempting to withdraw from the world, thereby drown in it, Stencil seeks to remain alive in it, to keep afloat in its tides of

²⁸Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Questing Comedian: Thomas Pynchon's V.," Critique, 6, No. 3 (1963-64), 175.

absurdity by rearranging the waves. Not as extreme as Cleanth Siegel's response, Stencil's reaction is a further extension of Meatball Mulligan's, and the extremity of the response accounts for the dangers inherent in it. As Meatball attempts to restore order in a society which, by its very nature, destroys order, so Stencil attempts to impose meaning upon and glean significance from a universe which resists meaning and is empty of significance. If Meatball and Herbert labor in vain, the labor itself is meretorious. The effort, not the result, is of value, and in this world which is rapidly running out of alternatives, in which no alternative will be completely successful, the paranoid quest provides at the very least an active response.

Herbert Stencil is a man struggling for position and survival in a world which would destroy both; his paranoid quest for V. is the vehicle by which he achieves them. The search lends significance to his life, and in a world as chaotic as this one, human life attains only the significance one is willing to work for. The grand Cabal he envisions all about him is its own raison d'être, the avenue by which he orders random events into the context of meaning and logic. The threat of conspiracy is, for Herbert Stencil, vastly preferable to the horror of randomness, for, as Fausto Maijstral states, there may well be too much accident to this life to admit to and remain sane. The paranoia to which Stencil succumbs is precisely and

paradoxically what keeps him sane in a mad and maddening universe.

If all of it--V. and her plot--is illusion, it is a vital illusion. In the face of the Wasteland, some kind of illusion may be necessary, and viable delusion may become a survival tactic in a world rapidly running out of alternatives.²⁹ Richard Lehan insists that in making his fictions, man makes himself.³⁰ By means of his V. creation, Stencil creates a world. If it is a lonely, isolating, tormenting world which no one else understands or shares, it is nonetheless a world which no one can take away.

That Stencil's quest never ends is also of no consequence. That he never discovers who or what V. really is is in itself a blessing. Robert Buckeye states: "Events, places, facts have value only in their relation to each other. As the meaning of Stencil's search indicates, qualities, quantities, and states of Venus, Veronica, or Venezuela are unimportant; only the directions he moves, the relationships of V-ness he discovers, V-ness itself have significance."³¹ The quest represents a process which, in order to be effective, must be incomplete; motion, not

²⁹Hausdorf, p. 268.

³⁰A Dangerous Crossing, p. 183.

³¹Robert Buckeye, "The Anatomy of the Psychic Novel," Critique, 9, No. 2 (1967), 36.

discovery, is of value. An end in itself, the paranoid quest has Pynchon's approval. In the Wasteland today, it has to be the going, not the getting there, that's good, and Pynchon gives the nod to those who get up to get going.

III

Much like pre-V. Herbert Stencil, pre-Tristero Oedipa Maas is "an eviscerated Californian falling into the cavity of herself, finding in the floating debris around her nothing solid enough to hold her up."³² A typical suburban housewife and average citizen with a personal history composed of events no more meaningful than attendance at Tupperware parties enlivened by "too much kirsch in the fondue" (Crying, 1), her twenty-eight years collectively comprise only "a fat deckful of days which seemed . . . more or less identical, or all pointing the same way subtly like a conjuror's deck" (Crying, 2). When suddenly named co-executrix of her dead lover's estate, she is violently shaken from her routine existence. The legacy of Pierce Inverarity allows Oedipa to choose a personal nightmare of paranoia and the conviction of conspiracy as an alternative preferable to the void, for as long as she is embroiled in this search for meaning, a search Roger Henkle believes to be representative of "the desperate and possibly self-destructive drive of Americans to understand the causes of the meaninglessness of their lives,"³³ she is exempt from falling victim to the Wasteland.

³²Shorris, p. 80.

³³"Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," p. 215.

Previous to the death of Inverarity, Oedipa had endured a persistent feeling of entrapment; about her existence there "had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix" (Crying, 10). Frequently she imagined herself to be Rapunzel, "a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair" (Crying, 10). When Pierce Inverarity arrived on the scene, Oedipa, with reserved daring, took him as lover, believing in that minimal gesture she could conjure a rescuer, a shining knight who would deliver her to freedom.

Unfortunately, such was not to be the case, for Oedipa soon discovered that the affair had not released her at all, and "all that had then gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower" (Crying, 10). A Remedios Varo painting seen in Mexico City illuminated her as to her persistent sense of entrapment; in the triptych she saw a number of girls, prisoners in a tower, embroidering a tapestry which "spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world" (Crying, 10). As Pynchon unfolds his second novel, it becomes obvious

that the plight of the Rapunzel-like weavers in Varo's "Bordando el Manto Terrestre" symbolizes the predicament and paralysis of those who endure an insipid, self-defined culture.³⁴ Outside the tower is the void world of contemporary America, an arena of menacing uncertainty and absurdity, its essence a "magic, anonymous and malignant" (Crying, 11). It is this threatening void outside, everywhere, which frightens Oedipa and has forced her tower incarceration.

In an initial attempt to flee the tower, Oedipa herself had embroidered a tapestry with Pierce Inverarity the central emblem; as with the girls in the painting, however, the exercise had proven futile, and "Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape" (Crying, 11). Inverarity had neither carried her to freedom nor dispersed the outside threat; the affair which was intended to save her had failed of its purpose because the void is indispersible, and the tower, located in its midst, is but another version of the same.

As Oedipa suspects, the world surrounding her prison is uncertain and probably dangerous, but, as she only intuitively senses, her middle-class Kinneret tower, with the very routine and understandable existence it offers, is also a void; beneath its secure and sensible surface lies

³⁴Cowart, p. 25.

the nothingness which characterizes the Wasteland lurking outside.

Desiring escape from both and situated in an apparently irresolvable quandry, a disconcerted Oedipa Maas formulates alternatives, which are few and equally undesirable: ". . . she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?" (Crying, 11). Her first hobby, the Inverarity affair, a failure and her subsequent non-communicative marriage to a disk jockey also a failure, to Oedipa remains the "what else," which, as it develops, proves to be a sort of embroidery-superstition-madness.

The "what else" for Oedipa is escape from the tower and escape-of-sorts from the void outside by a paradoxical plunge into the midst of that void via the legacy of her dead lover; the rescue Pierce was unable to effect while alive he forces upon her, intentionally or unintentionally, when deceased. Previous to his death, Oedipa had allowed herself to remain a half-unwilling captive in her narrow, predictable prison; as John Hunt observes, she had "settled for such a life because of a 'gut fear' . . . that outside the tower was only void, only death, or what would pass for it--meanings which would destroy the limited sense she had made of life. Inverarity's will forces her out of the

tower and into the void, to face whatever nameless and malignant magic had held her prisoner."³⁵

Through Pierce Inverarity, says David Kirby, Oedipa is compelled to "pierce inveracity," to truly penetrate the lie of her own life.³⁶ Upon escape, she is forced to recognize that her Kinneret tower-world, in addition to being empty of real meaning, is but a distorted, scaled-down, false model of reality; she is also compelled to contend for the first time with the ambiguous and terrifyingly insecure real world beyond the tower. Oedipa Maas' story is, in many ways, an enactment of a popular literary theme which Paul Levine describes as "the terrible confrontation between the illusions by which we invest our lives with order, meaning, and security as a defense against reality and the prowling reality which is ever ready to strip us of our defenses and reveal its true violent and absurd nature."³⁷

In order to accept Pierce's challenge, Oedipa must forsake the rationality which exactly orders her Kinneret life and superimposes on it a too-intelligible interpretation. According to Kierkegaard and fellow existentialists,

³⁵"Comic Escape and Anti-Vision," p. 108.

³⁶David K. Kirby, "Two Modern Versions of the Quest," Southern Humanities Review, 5 (1971), 392.

³⁷Paul Levine, "The Intemperate Zone: The Climate of Contemporary Fiction," Massachusetts Review, 8, No. 3 (Summer, 1967), 518.

real meaning is drained from all such rational lives precisely because they have been so narrowly defined.³⁸ Such has been the predicament of pre-Tristero Oedipa Maas, who, as Kolodny and Peters point out, has "been conditioned to see the world in terms of symmetrical dualities rather than coextensive multiplicities."³⁹ In her too-reasonable, black and white tower-world, she can only be complacent, enervated and unmotivated.

When she undertakes the task of organizing Inverarity's surviving interests, she is obliged to enter a gray world of the completely unknown. As soon-to-be-quester in an undefined land, she must face the threat of the uncertain, which implies the elements of both loss and gain. Sypher recounts that Ortega and kindred philosophers propounded the theory that "we do not begin to live until we feel ourselves lost--that is, until we feel the security of logic give way and we try to get along with only probabilities, or possibilities, which reason cannot completely master. In true existence every instant brings uncertainty."⁴⁰ And the Tristero, to which Inverarity's estate seems to be inextricably linked, implies nothing if not uncertainty; it

³⁸Sypher, p. 66.

³⁹"Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49," p. 84.

⁴⁰Loss of the Self, p. 66.

is undefined and apparently undefinable. Through her quest for the answer to its complex riddle, Oedipa Maas achieves, for the first time, a meaningful existence. She enters the void world of reality and attains in the process redemption from complacency, vital animation and a sense of purpose and direction. But, like Herbert Stencil, she acquires these saving elements at a cost, for the void world is frustrating and hostile, frightening and maddeningly random. Long-accustomed to the all-too-predictable and serenely mundane, she must assume the armor of paranoia in order to survive.

Although Oedipa enters the city of San Narciso "with no idea she was moving toward anything new" (Crying, 12), her anxious mental state has primed her for the new paranoia to which she proves so receptive. Suspecting her appointment as executrix to be a result of Inverarity's annoyance with her (Crying, 3), an example of his unpredictable maliciousness, she accepts the assignment feeling "exposed, finessed, put down" (Crying, 3). With her neurotic husband incapable of assisting her and her attorney only partially willing, Oedipa can find no one to execute Pierce's will for her, and, thus, reluctantly abandons her Kinneret herb garden for San Narciso.

San Narciso-bound, bereft of her insulation and readily-understandable world, Oedipa finds herself suddenly thrust into a world where there seems to be too much meaning, all of which is incomprehensible. Scanning the city

in which she is to find her co-executor and Pierce's books and records, she is inexplicably struck by "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (Crying, 13). Upon viewing a television commercial for an Inverarity business interest, she senses that "some immediacy was there again, some promise of hierophany" (Crying, 18). After only a short while on the job, Oedipa is convinced there is "revelation in progress all around her" (Crying, 28), and the intent, the meaning, is escaping her; the inner resources and intuitions cultivated for dealing with her Kinneret environment leave her at a loss to make sense of her unfamiliar surroundings. Sensitive to the random revelations which are descending upon her and frustrated by their indecipherability, insecure in an arena saturated with too much meaning, alone and somewhat frightened about an arduous and, possibly, malevolent assignment which she suspects is "more than honorary" (Crying, 1), Mrs. Maas easily succumbs to paranoia.

Paranoia alleviates her uncomfortable situation, is, in fact, seductive for the peculiar sort of comfort it affords; according to Hendrik Hertzberg and David McClelland, the condition offers "the comfort of a universe ordered about oneself, a comfort that many people are willing to pay for in the currency of anguish. Paranoia is the very opposite of meaninglessness; indeed, paranoia drenches

every detail of the world in meaning."⁴¹ The paranoia Oedipa assumes enables her to bring into focus the random and absurd occurrences in the void, to glean meaning from and impose order upon them. As that paranoia explodes into a belief in a treacherous plot, the target of which is none other than herself, she enters into a quest which will insure her safe distance from Rapunzel's tower and absent her from the Wasteland's list of victims.

The development of Oedipa's protective paranoia is instantaneous. When she meets Metzger, her immediate reaction is that the one-time Baby Igor is "so good-looking that . . . They, somebody up there, were putting her on" (Crying, 16), and as their first night together wears on amid drinking, Strip Botticelli, mixed-up reels of Cashiered and an explosive sexual experience, Mrs. Maas begins to believe the lawyer had either created the ridiculous film for the occasion, or he had "bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this, it's all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, plot" (Crying, 18). Suddenly sensitized into a prepared-for-plots mental state, "things then did not delay in turning curious. If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Tristero System or often only The Tristero (as if it might be something's secret title) were to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower,

⁴¹"Paranoia," p. 60.

then that night's infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it; logically. That's what would come to haunt her most, perhaps; the way it fitted, logically, together" (Crying, 28). After one meeting with Metzger, Oedipa is in the grips of paranoia, wherein everything is logical, wherein there are no random, unrelated events.

As time progresses, Oedipa is battered with revelations which relate too peculiarly; so logical are the connections, in fact, that she nourishes a suspicion that every person with whom she speaks, every odd event that occurs, every tenuous clue she uncovers is in some way tied in with Tristero. Even Inverarity's stamp collection holds the potential for revelation. While alive, Pierce had spent a great deal of time with his collection, and then "she had never seen the fascination" (Crying, 23), had "no suspicion at all that it might have something to tell her;" as paranoid executrix of his estate, however, sensitized by the ominous logic of her seduction and "other, almost offhand things," she begins to wonder "what after all could the mute stamps have told her?" (Crying, 29).

Once Oedipa has received a strangely-postmarked letter from husband Mucho, conversed with Peter Pinguid member, Mike Fallopiian, seen her first W.A.S.T.E. symbol and witnessed an unorthodox mail delivery in the Scope Bar, she is ready to begin piecing together an anti-world which

gathers unto itself all the meaning of the void. Believing each new revelation to fit together too logically to be pure coincidence, Oedipa posits the existence of a great, on-going conspiracy aimed at driving her to madness at the very least. Weaving together a few random bits of information, her paranoia provides the mental impetus for a grand cabal, and "so began, for Oedipa, the languid, sinister blooming of *The Tristero*" (Crying, 36). And bloom the enigmatic conspiracy does, if not in fact, then in response to Oedipa's need.

Whether *Tristero* is actual or fantasy remains throughout The Crying of Lot 49 an unanswered question. Raymond Olderman maintains that in Lot 49 "Pynchon seriously considers the possibility that conspiracies could exist."⁴² Robert Sklar states that this second novel is "the story of how Mrs. Oedipa Maas discovers a world within her world, an anti-world, an adversary world--or invents one in her imagination."⁴³ Throughout the book's 138 pages, the alternatives remain fixed: either *Tristero* exists in its own right, or it is a mental projection of a paranoid housewife-turned-detective. Very likely it is the latter.

Scattered throughout the novel are hints that the *Tristero* conspiracy is a tapestry Oedipa weaves to fill the

⁴²Beyond the Wasteland, p. 144.

⁴³"The New Novel, USA," p. 279.

void she must penetrate, a tapestry to refashion that void's ambiguous and multiple meanings; the plot she envisions all about her may well be the product of her need to impose a measure of order and coherence on her very new and very threatening experience. Oedipa is alerted to her precarious position in the Wasteland when she attempts to see her reflection in a broken mirror and finds nothing, an incident which results in "a moment of nearly pure terror" (Crying, 26). The lack of her image in the mirror, the sudden knowledge that outside her tower she is nothing surrounded by nothingness, haunts her and keeps her waking and reawaking from a nightmare (Crying, 74). It may also result in the mental fabrication of Tristero.

Soon into her assignment, Oedipa herself intimates that she may be bringing more than just her physical efforts to the task. Paranoid and sensitive to the least glimmering of conspiracy, she succumbs without valid reason to the suspicion that Pierce's testament holds the key to the vast mystery of another world, and, as past lover and present executrix, "it was part of her duty, wasn't it, to bestow life on what had persisted, to try to be . . . the dark machine in the centre of the planetarium, to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her?" (Crying, 58). To bestow is, most commonly, to give as a gift; Oedipa's bestowal of life upon Pierce's interests may well be a gift of life where none exists or

has previously existed. Like a planetarium machine, Oedipa, through a willed mental exercise, may be superimposing the order and position of the stars of meaning which dot her conspiratorial universe. Pondering the very first posthorn she discovers, she writes in her memo book: "Shall I project a world?" (Crying, 59). Not discover a world, but project a world. That projected world is Tristero, in which she finds new magic to counteract the old which held her prisoner in Kinneret.

Having once dedicated herself to the self-imposed quest, she retraces earlier steps, returns to the Scope and Fangoso Lagoons, where she may have overlooked clues, "owing to this, what you might have to call, growing obsession, with 'bringing something of herself'--even if that something was just her presence--to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity" (Crying, 65). So great do Oedipa's obsession with Tristero and her belief in the existence of the underground grow that what she brings to Inverarity's testament, in addition to her presence, may well be a hyperactive imagination. So determined does she become to "create constellations" (Crying, 65) that she is able to pull together one conspiracy from the multi-millionaire's immensely numerous and widely-scattered interests and investments. How much of that conspiracy is fact and how much is fiction is open to question, but it is more than possible that it may be entirely imaginary, for, after

making her acquaintance with the Tristero prospect, Oedipa has increasing difficulty in separating fantasy from reality.

Having searched for the posthorn throughout one San Francisco night, she senses that later "she would have trouble sorting the night into real and dreamed" (Crying, 86). The posthorn becomes, ultimately, so essential to Mrs. Maas' existence that in her incessant search for it, she grows "so to expect it that perhaps she did not see it quite as often as she later was to remember seeing it" (Crying, 91). The posthorn and the conspiracy it symbolizes may be nothing actual at all, but both are real enough for the one-time housewife. Tristero and symbol bring the void into sharp focus, and that void produces an even brighter, clearer picture when Oedipa herself emerges as the intended victim of the plot.

In fine paranoid fashion, Oedipa orders her unfamiliar world completely around herself; she suspects from the outset of her mission that at the heart of her quarry lies something evil, possibly destructive, which is bent on doing her in. Prematurely envisioning the time when she will confront the Tristero "in its terrible nakedness" (Crying, 36), she wonders if it will reveal itself finally as friend or foe: "Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage, say goodnight with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in peace? Or would

it, instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa's, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear?" (Crying, 36). There is really no valid question, however, for at the very beginning Oedipa decides that Tristero is foe indeed.

During the performance of The Courier's Tragedy, Oedipa hears the word "Trystero" along with a couplet defining its malignant nature, and, although the word was "not yet to exert the power over her it was to" (Crying, 52), she is suddenly compelled to beg Metzger to "be on her side" against adversaries as yet unknown but who, Oedipa instinctively senses, will issue from Tristero. Somewhat intimidated but nonetheless intrigued with the play scenes relating to the treacherous black assassins, the sleuth decides to search out director Randolph Driblette and ask about "Trystero." Having done so, she discovers she "hadn't wanted to say the word. He had managed to create around it the same aura of ritual reluctance here, offstage, as he had on" (Crying, 56). Driblette is quick to deny encouragement; he refuses to answer Oedipa's questions and darkly advises her to leave it all alone. But Oedipa is not to leave it alone; rather, she leaves the evasive director convinced that the Tristero, whatever it is, is of an evil nature. When her co-executor subsequently seems intent on

running her down with his car in the theatre parking lot, she has her first bit of evidence that the prime target of this Tristero is none other than Oedipa Maas.

In the infant stages of her paranoia, Oedipa is fascinated by the prospect of self-destruction her assignment seems to imply. The possibility--as yet totally unfounded--is directly antithetical to anything which has happened or could happen in her routinely secure, nondescript Kinneret daily life and is almost appealing for the sense of excitement it offers; in initially committing herself to the endeavor, with its seemingly self-destructive element, Oedipa "faced that possibility as she might the toy street from a high balcony, roller-coaster ride, feeding-time among the beasts in a zoo--any death-wish that can be consummated by some minimum gesture. She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it; that not gravity's pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening, promised more delight" (Crying, 87). This allure is to fade quickly as hypothetical danger and evil turn into a maliciousness too real for Oedipa and as her mission becomes an exhausting, confusing and desperate obsession.

As a self-made detective fresh on the Tristero track and eager for clues of any kind, Oedipa is disheartened when her efforts fail to uncover them. At the Tank Theatre, she enters the restroom deliberately looking for the W.A.S.T.E.

symbol; when it does not appear, "she could not say why, exactly, but felt threatened by this absence of even the marginal try at communication latrines are known for" (Crying, 48). Somewhat later, however, as she continues with what becomes the awesome task of piercing through and piecing together an enigma, her enthusiasm flags.

As clues proliferate, and she is forced to assume unto herself revelation after revelation, it appears to Oedipa "as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero" (Crying, 58). Firmly entrenched in an anti-world saturated with meaning and determined to glean order from it, Mrs. Maas finds herself confronted with an incredible task, for the clues which emerge everywhere she turns seem to be too many and too dissociated to lend themselves to unified pattern.

Oedipa's clues range from the mysterious mail delivery and muted posthorn symbol at the Scope, to Mucho's irregularly-postmarked letter, to an ominous reference in a revenge play, to Driblette, Koteks and Nefastis, to an underground of individualistic inventors, to a historical marker at Fangoso Lagoons, to old Thoth's tale of marauders disguised as Indians, to irregular stamps discovered by Genghis Cohen, philatelist hired to appraise Inverarity's stamp collection. Although each bit of evidence seems to point to the existence of a widespread conspiracy designed

to oppose and evade distribution of mail by the government, Oedipa cannot solidify the clues to prove her thesis.

As that which began as mission mushrooms into obsession, she experiences an increasingly desperate sense of futility. Like an epileptic who recognizes the signal announcing the seizure but never comprehends the events of the attack, she begins to suspect that the many leads she has collected may never resolve themselves into an ultimate truth; she frequently wonders if "at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. . . . She . . . saw, for the very first time, how far it might be possible to get lost in this" (Crying, 69).

As her quest consumes her, Oedipa does find herself hopelessly lost, for Tristero monopolizes the action of every waking moment and infiltrates her dreams as well. Yet, for all of her perseverance, she never achieves the mystery's solution. As newly-named executrix, she had entered San Narciso only to find herself located "at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words

were being spoken" (Crying, 13). As obsessed quester, it seems as if the answer to the mystery will always remain just past the threshold of her understanding, will be communicated on a frequency with which she is not in tune. Grappling with her stubborn clues, she realizes she is "faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts . . . With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together" (Crying, 80).

By virtue of her persistent paranoia, Oedipa is able to hold her coincidences together and keep alive and intact a belief in a malicious underworld conspiracy and a steady resolve to unearth its secrets. But the anti-world threatens to overwhelm her totally, shows itself a foe she has neither the mental nor physical stamina to withstand. If her paranoia offers a means by which to order the void and avoid insignificance and disintegration, it also exacts a toll of personal anguish, for, as Hertzberg and McClelland explain, "the paranoid view of reality can make everyday life terrifying and social intercourse problematical. And paranoia is tiring. It requires exhausting mental effort to construct trains of thought demonstrating that random events or details 'prove' a wholly unconnected premise."⁴⁴ The price Oedipa pays for her paranoid Tristero obsession

⁴⁴"Paranoia," p. 52.

is physical deterioration, social isolation and a frightening brush with insanity.

Harried and "hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man's estate" (Crying, 80), Oedipa decides at one point to abandon the obviously Inverarity-controlled areas surrounding San Narciso and journey to San Francisco in an attempt either to uncover the clues which will at last elucidate the mystery and confirm the existence of the conspiracy or to discover a total absence of clues, which will attest to the fictional nature of the plot.

Distanced from Pierce's established domain, she wanders out into the San Francisco night with the faint hope "there might still be a chance of getting the whole thing to go away and disintegrate quietly. She only had to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix" (Crying, 80). Almost unfortunately for the tormented Mrs. Maas, something does happen, for "it took her no more than an hour to catch sight of a muted post horn" (Crying, 80). In a bar called The Greek Way, where she spots a man wearing a posthorn-shaped pin, she admits to herself: "You lose. A game try, all one hour's worth" (Crying, 81). After telling herself she should leave but being unable to do so, Oedipa questions the man about Tristero, confessing plaintively: "'I think of nothing but'" (Crying, 82), and listens with despair as the unnamed

member of Inamorati Anonymous reveals yet another facet of the conspiracy--a group of failed suicides dedicated to the prevention of love.

Burdened now with another piece to assimilate into the puzzle and believing herself to be uncomfortably close to madness, Oedipa stumbles through the night only to find San Francisco as Tristero-infected as the areas she has left behind. She approaches panic when the posthorn appears at every turn, attached to every person she encounters, and, with a fatalism appropriate to a paranoia victim, compares her present self to a former Oedipa Maas:

Where was the Oedipa who'd driven so bravely up here from San Narciso? That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules to solve any great mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on. This night's profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of beating up. They knew her pressure points, and the ganglia of her optimism, and one by one, pinch by precision pinch, they were immobilizing her. (Crying, 91-92)

The woman who had hoped to settle the Tristero question for good and all finds at the end of twenty-four hours in San Francisco that "she was back where she'd started" (Crying, 97), having come full circle while growing no wiser and now forced to wrestle with more vexatious clues and an even firmer sense of the futility of her pursuit. By degrees, she has lost her bearings, "feeling like a fluttering curtain

in a very high window, moving up to then out over the abyss" (Crying, 114). At one point she finds herself dangerously no longer in control of her own actions. In a telephone call to a Tristero informant, she begs for clarification on the conspiracy, pleading: "'I got drunk and went driving on these freeways. Next time I may be more deliberate. For the love of God, human life, whatever you respect, please. Help me'" (Crying, 133).

Exhausted, demoralized, with every ounce of her sleuth ingenuity spent, Oedipa remains faced with the spectre of a too-complex and still-unsolved Tristero riddle. With her executrix mission having become too great, she grasps at alternatives and begins hopefully to try to persuade herself that Tristero is merely a figment of her sick imagination, something she has willfully created to add a dimension of mystery and excitement to her sterile life.

Almost optimistically she tells herself "she might well be in the cold and sweatless meathooks of a psychosis" (Crying, 98). Attempting to ignore the fact that she has witnessed Tristero symbols, stamps, mailboxes and a mail delivery, Oedipa finds herself wanting "it all to be fantasy--some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles. She wanted Hilarious to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest, and that there was no Tryster. She also wanted to know why the chance of its being real should menace her so" (Crying, 98). Already,

however, she understands why a Tristero reality poses such a threat. It demands involvement and pursuit to the extent of isolation and agony, while it simultaneously defies logical explanation. If it is real, Oedipa, compelled almost against her will to pursue it, is apparently without the resources to unravel its mystery and comprehend its totality. If it is fiction, however--or if Oedipa can believe it to be fiction--she may be released from its malignant spell and rendered free to regain her sense of mental balance and physical well-being. Clearly, for the tortured quester, her own present insanity seems the more pleasant alternative and an easy escape from a desperate plight.

For Oedipa Maas, however, the pleasant alternative is neither possible nor truly desirable. If Tristero threatens to cripple her, the absence of Tristero promises to destroy her. Although the endless quest has forced upon her toothaches, nausea, headaches, nightmares and exhaustion, her active, purposeful existence hinges on this search for meaning. Tristero alone keeps Oedipa from the tower and insures her passage through the void. If the conspiracy is illusion, it is a necessary illusion. David Cowart states: "The Tristero may or may not exist, but whether delusion or discovery it is Oedipa's salvation, the trampa she embroiders to escape a world of conventional and deadly reality into a world of richer personal reality. That the Tristero and the whole tapestry of The Crying of Lot 49 are

being embroidered in Oedipa's head hardly matters: the important consideration is that she is now becoming responsible for her own mental tapestry."⁴⁵ Even the demented psychiatrist Hilarious realizes how vital Tristero is to Oedipa's life; when she visits him in hopes he will talk her out of the obsession, Hilarious cries fiercely: "'Cherish it! . . . What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be'" (Crying, 103) .

Oedipa herself recognizes that, whatever Tristero is, it is somehow vital to her. If at times her desperation results in a desire for the conspiracy to be fantasy, she is never able to cherish the wish for long. When Mike Fallopian questions: "'Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?,'" she is forced to admit that "it had occurred to her. But like the thought that someday she would have to die, Oedipa had been steadfastly refusing to look at that possibility directly, or in any but the most accidental of lights" (Crying, 126). Now pregnant with Tristero (Crying, 131), Oedipa cannot

⁴⁵"Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and the Paintings of Remedios Varo," p. 24.

bring herself to believe it is fantasy any more than she can abandon the search for its solution. Without the anti-world, she will be cast helplessly adrift in a world where too many meanings render everything meaningless, "for this, oh God, was the void" (Crying, 128). The Tristero tapestry brings those incoherent meanings into one meaning, albeit evasive and distorted. Without this evil directed against her, without clues to track and informants to hound, she will be forced to "breathe in a vacuum" (Crying, 128) or to return to tower-life; without Tristero there is only void. So, for Oedipa Maas, the conspiracy must be a reality; if it is not, she must remain a paranoid convinced of the existence and actuality of this most necessary illusion.

Tristero itself is redemptive only insofar as it provides the possibility for pursuit. The pieces are of value, for they supply the initiative for her quest; the clues to the enigma are her "compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (Crying, 87). Of this sentence, Catharine Stimpson states: "The capitalization of 'Word' is vital: it is a translation, linguistically and conceptually, of the Greek 'logos', an animating and renewing principle of reason in the cosmos."⁴⁶ As a middle-class

⁴⁶Catharine R. Stimpson, "Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism: Thomas Pynchon's Early Fiction," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), p. 44.

Kinneret housewife, Oedipa lost more than a country and a self; reason and meaning evaporated as she languished in her safe and stifling tower. Because what there is of significance in her life now resides in this compensating quest, the prospect of an end poses a great threat. Precisely for this reason, Oedipa is hesitant to uncover the entire meaning of her experience. While she is compelled to seek out connections in order to keep the quest alive, she is simultaneously wary of making them too concrete.

In Stencilian fashion, when Oedipa believes she is approaching too closely to what could be the final solution, she backs off and engages for a while in avoidance techniques. Confronting bookseller Zapf about The Courier's Tragedy, Oedipa senses the need to stop mid-question, initiating what "was to be the first of many demurs" (Crying, 65). When clues seem to fit together too ominously or neatly, she begins "to feel reluctant about following up anything" (Crying, 124). Oedipa fails to check back with Cohen on irregular stamps, refuses to re-visit informants and ignores new leads because she is "leery of what she might find" (Crying, 125). Now fearful of arriving at the day when Tristero reveals itself in its nakedness and forces upon her a complete and final understanding, the quester becomes "anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself" (Crying, 125).

Too much revelation will destroy her. It is imperative that Oedipa never be left with nothing more to pursue and, therefore, nothing towards which to direct her acquired sense of purpose. Anne Mangel remarks: "The motion involved in a pursuit is in itself important, as it is in V. There, Stencil's meandering search for V. at least saves him from inertness. He dislikes thinking about any possible conclusion to his pursuit, preferring to 'approach and avoid.' The same refusal to resolve confusion and reach any conclusion about the Trystero characterizes Oedipa. Her continual doubt and re-evaluation of events differentiates her from other characters in the novel who do, in fact, end in closed systems of inertness."⁴⁷

Possessing dozens of leads, Oedipa says at one point: "'It's over . . . they've saturated me. From here on I'll only close them out'" (Crying, 133), but it is unlikely that she can and improbable that she would. Rather, she seems determined to wrestle with the four alternatives to the Inverarity legacy, which have remained constant during her quest and which offer great possibilities for paranoia. Faced with a comforting range of possibilities rather than one terminal option, Oedipa reflects on the feasible sources of her situation:

Either you have stumbled indeed, without
the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto

⁴⁷"Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information," p. 200.

a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate, involving items like the forging of stamps and ancient books, constant surveillance of your movements, planting of post horn images all over San Francisco, bribing of librarians, hiring of professional actors and Pierce Inverarity only knows what-all-besides, all financed out of the estate in a way either too secret or too involved for your non-legal mind to know about even though you are co-executor, so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. (Crying, 128)

These are the four alternatives, none of them especially pleasant, with which Oedipa is faced as she is forced to attend the auction of Inverarity's irregular stamps, the crying of Lot 49.

The prospect of the impending stamp auction fills Oedipa with dread. If she goes, she may uncover the clue, the connection which will bring her pursuit to an abrupt conclusion; but, compelled to make connections in order to keep the quest alive, staying away from the auction will certainly end it. In this precarious position, she summons her last reserve of courage, "the courage you find you have when there is nothing more to lose" (Crying, 137), and

prepares to do battle with the mysterious bidder, whom she suspects to be a Tristero emissary. Having first formulated plans for apprehending the mystery-man, she enters the auction room unsure as to what she will do if and when he reveals himself and concludes by "wondering if she'd go through with it" (Crying, 137). The reader, in turn, is left wondering if Tristero is a reality or a hoax and if the crying will end Oedipa's quest, after all.

But Pynchon, on the last two pages of his novel, implies that the crying of Lot 49 will not prove to be the end for Oedipa, that, rather, it will merely offer her another lead to be hounded and a further incentive for pursuit. Although Oedipa fears that the auction of Inverarity's stamp collection may offer up the final clue, there is no indication this clue will prove to be any different from her previous ones, which led her not to a solution but around and around in a large, unending circle. As she attends the auction, she is acting again only on suspicions and possibilities. Oedipa only suspects that the mysterious bidder may be from Tristero; the bidder's agent tells her she might run into him at the auction--"She might" (Crying, 137). And as she enters the room where the crying will take place, she does so with her paranoia intact; to Oedipa, all in attendance are staring at her with pale, cruel faces. She is left guessing, as she has been throughout her quest, left wondering which of the men would be "her target, her enemy,

perhaps her proof" (Crying, 138). Perhaps her proof, but not likely. Rather, it appears from these hints and the novel's abrupt and ambiguous ending that the crying will result in only another step along the Tristero track rather than the end of the journey.

Thus, Oedipa will continue on her endless quest, by means of which she can come to terms with a crushing reality and avoid disintegration in its multiplicity and chaos, rid herself of inertia, acquire purpose and direction and glean both significance and meaning which the Wasteland cannot destroy. For all of its dangers and defects, Oedipa's paranoid quest is an alternative to the Wasteland; if it is extreme, it is an alternative nonetheless. Randolph Driblette's warning emerges as a blessing in spite of itself; the director had admonished Oedipa: "'You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several . . . You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth'" (Crying, 56). Fortunately, he is right.

PAROUSIA: THE PRICE OF PASSIVITY

"Life is to be lived, not controlled;
and humanity is won by continuing to play
in the face of certain defeat."

--Ralph Ellison,
Invisible Man--

Gravity's Rainbow, contends Neil Schmitz, is a demonstration of "Pynchon's loathing for the continuity of the obscene in history, the overwhelming sense that it has always been thus, always as dire. . . . So wicked is the world depicted in Gravity's Rainbow, so burdened with lunacy and despair, that indeed it deserves to be ended."¹ That deserved, world-annihilating parousia is Pynchon's donnée. Blicero's 00000 and its secret and sought-after cargo, the Imipolex-shrouded Gottfried, symbolizing the consummate fusion of man and death-machine, is descending; launched toward the exact center of the earth, it has been frozen at Brennschluss and now, more than thirty years later, returns to the last delta-t, located just above Los Angeles' Orpheus Theatre. Falling a mile per second, the Rocket-Avenger promises deliverance from "this cycle of

¹Neil Schmitz, "Describing the Demon: The Appeal of Thomas Pynchon," Partisan Review, 42, No. 1 (1975), 120.

infection and death" (GR, 724). Enzian's subsequent 00001 will complete the bleaching of Blicero's Rilkean transcendence, bringing everything to Absolute Zero. It is "a judgment from which there is no appeal" (GR, 4).

The less cataclysmic V. and The Crying of Lot 49, as well as the short stories, are Pynchon's fictional endorsements of active resistance to the negative, malevolent forces which drive the universe; they disclose the necessity of struggling to retain humanity, integrity, meaning and life itself in a nightmare world of chaos and corruption. Gravity's Rainbow is an exposé on the end to which our passivity, our unwillingness to resist, has brought us. In this third novel, which Richard Locke describes as "bone-crushingly dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, funny, tragic, pastoral, historical, philosophical, poetic, grindingly dull, inspired, horrific, cold, bloated, bleached and blasted,"² Pynchon's concern lies with the events which have led us to that final moment of horror and hymn just prior to the annihilation of the world.

In grotesquely exaggerated and distorted images, Pynchon paints a picture of man's historical quest for self-destruction, his long-term obsession with creating and perfecting methods and machines of death to which he, ultimately, will be sacrificed. He traces the annihilistic pursuits of those in power which have resulted in the

²Richard Locke, "Gravity's Rainbow," New York Times Book Review, 11 March 1973, p. 1.

hegemony of death-systems upon the earth: "They," the agglomeration of multinational, industrial-political-scientific omnipotent elite, have been conspiring, contriving and controlling throughout history to construct Their System, which has devoted itself and its vast energies and resources to the perversion of nature and the destruction of all life within the universe. They have succeeded, for the Lord of Night reigns, and Apocalypse is at hand. And They have been aided in Their enterprise, for "We," the powerless and passed-over ordinary people, have succored and abetted Them.

The Preterite are guilty of complicity; they have assisted in the birth of the Wasteland and are as responsible as They for the messianic Rocket which will bleach it to ultrawhite. They have capitulated to Their demands, submitted to Their controls and continued in Their service, unwilling to surrender the comfort and security existence within the System affords, all the while understanding that "living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide" (GR, 412). Cooperating in the quest for annihilation, the Preterite have been damned through their passivity. Of all things obscene in this world, declares Melvin Maddocks, the supreme for Thomas Pynchon is that ordinary people are willing to have life defined for them by men

whose singular talent is for death.³

Gravity's Rainbow reveals that opportunities for freedom are real. The passed-over simply choose to refuse them. At the interfaces of their lives, those transitory moments of possibility, they will not act, voluntarily relinquishing autonomy and, in the process, self-respect and the chance for a meaningful, satisfying existence.

Frightened of the randomness which teems outside Their well-ordered, highly-efficient and smoothly-functioning System, the Preterite acquiesce to Their patterns of thought and established structures, withdraw into the solace of numbing illusions or retreat into paranoia in order to endure enslavement and a Systematic, slow-but-certain death at the hands of those who are completing annihilistic endeavors initiated at the emergence of the human race.

Since the beginning of his history, white Western man has courted death. Compelled to subdue and control, his overriding urge has been to subvert all things alive and life-inducing into lifeless systems and unnatural cycles. At the very birth of his social consciousness, he detected his purpose in the despoilation and destruction of life within the universe and assumed the promotion of death as his planetary mission (GR, 720). Warring against all random, vital, dynamic energies, man manifested his passion for

³Melvin Maddocks, "Paleface Takeover," Atlantic Monthly, 231 (March, 1973), 99.

dominion, and the life-and-death struggle between the forces of freedom and the forces of control ensued.

Western man established his death-kingdom through repressive and oppressive systems. Thought structures of Society, Christianity and Propriety squelched his own spontaneous, natural instincts; his sensuality was extinguished by a driving mania for rationality and order. Euphemisms such as Empire, Enterprise, Overseas Markets and Labor Shortage allowed him to expand his regulated kingdom and tame the primitive, savage energies of his "dark, secret children" (GR, 75) while indulging in secret his wildest death fantasies. Colonies, "the outhouses of the European soul" (GR, 317), soon became lifeless, infected with the West's systematic death.

America, an abundant land of unstructured and unhampered vitality, was a last frontier and a last hope for a return to natural life cycles. But Europe again systematized and methodized, perverting nature in the name of Modern Analysis, and found in the conquered country a compulsion to defilement greater than her own: "In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it kept on" (GR, 722). Inheriting Europe's maniacal rage to order and

control, America completed the cycle by imposing synthetic structure on her openness, decimating her dark-skinned savages and establishing her own rigid institutions and organizations. From those auspicious beginnings mushroomed similar structures, and a gradual worldwide merging of such death-systems resulted in the They cartel which controls and corrupts the world.

In Gravity's Rainbow, They are now completing the campaign for death. With "no real country, no side in any war, no specific face or heritage" (GR, 243), They are the abstractions of power which have supplanted personalities, the structures which govern the world by rational techniques (GR, 81). Ubiquitous, omniscient and anonymous, They are the international, multinational composite of bureaucracies, markets, corporations, interest groups and organizations political and apolitical which comprise the System's worldwide, interlocking network of control. Knowing what the powerless do not, They are privy to the "terrible structure behind the appearances of diversity and enterprise" (GR, 165).

If Their ways are inscrutable and Their means unlimited, Their ends are those which have motivated man from his genesis. Under the facade of growth, enterprise and dynamism, They impersonate life. Their seemingly organic, superficially diversified and vigorous System demonstrates only "the persistence . . . of structures favoring death.

Death converted into more death. Perfecting its reign" (GR, 167).

Death is perfecting its reign through technology, man's grandiose attempt to create his own order. A manifestation of Their control, it is simultaneously a power grown out of control, and They are now at the mercy of Their supremely destructive man-made system. Technology was born in the late nineteenth century when the German chemist, Kekulé von Stradonitz, interpreted his dream of an ancient symbol of unity and renewal as a vision which enabled the perversion of natural elements into the death-tools of plastics and rocketry.

Kekulé's dream of the benzene ring guaranteed no returns, no hermetic cycles and no salvation from an inevitable progression toward total annihilation:

Kekulé dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning," is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to violate the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity--most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its

addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. (GR, 412)

Technology is a system which depletes and despoils; it rapes the earth and employs her life-giving resources in the creation of tools of destruction.

Kekulé's desecration of the sacred cycle has culminated, through Their efforts, in a State "that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul" (GR, 566). The Rocket is a testimonial to Their death-engendering prowess; contained within the great airless arc of its trajectory is "a clear allusion to certain secret lusts that drive the planet . . . over its peak and down, plunging, burning, toward a terminal orgasm" (GR, 223). Pynchon's comment on the Rocket, the dead-end point of Their Faustian scientific impulses and irreversible pursuits, comes when the chemical formula C-H of pre-plastic time is replaced with a formula for inanimateness: ". . . in enormous letters, Si-N" (GR, 580).⁴ The technological product through which the planetary mission will be accomplished and all things brought to Absolute Zero, the Rocket encapsulates the paramount perversion of nature.

During its historically-extended death-trek, the System has made use of the talents and energies of the

⁴Thomas LeClair, "Death and Black Humor," Critique, 17, No. 1 (1975-76), 28.

Preterite, those who are not infected with Faustian ambitions and who cannot pierce Their facade of diversity and enterprise. Only half-unwilling victims, the powerless have been swept along in the establishment of the earthly death-kingdom and have contributed to the creation of destructive orders and systems. As tools of the manipulators, they have "cuddled 'em and kissed 'em" (GR, 640) and served Their ends by passively submitting to Their demands; silently acceding to the anonymous, dehumanizing energy of the Cartel/Corporation, they have become accomplices in a rage for destruction. David Leverenz points out that the passed-over have waived their opportunities for freedom and surrendered simple human urges toward love, kindness and life itself and then encouraged their children to be irredeemably bought, used, co-opted, fucked and corrupted by the various aspects of the System.⁵

Running technology's maze on Their command, the Preterite have assisted as well in the erection of the Rocket State, and "they must have guessed, once or twice--guessed and refused to believe--that everything, always, collectively, had been moving toward that purified shape latent in the sky, that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return. Yet they do move forever under it,

⁵David Leverenz, "On Trying to Read Gravity's Rainbow," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), p. 235.

reserved for its own black-and-white bad news certainly as if it were the Rainbow, and they its children" (GR, 209).

Refusing to oppose Them or to desist from aiding in the enterprise which must inevitably end "all in blood, in shock, without dignity" (GR, 413), mothers and fathers have acquiesced to the System and allowed their victimization at its hands. Fathers, who carry the virus of death (GR, 723), infect their sons with the same weakness, "the same passivity, the same masochistic fantasies they cherished in secret," and another cyclic perversion ensues as "generation after generation of men in love with pain and passivity serve out their time . . . silent, redolent of faded sperm, terrified of dying, desperately addicted to the comforts others sell them, however useless, ugly or shallow, willing to have life defined for them by men whose only talent is for death" (GR, 747). Awaiting the holocaust they have helped engineer via non-resistance, the powerless revert to paranoia to excuse their submission and to infuse their terrifyingly stark existences with a measure of appalling meaning.

The paranoia which serves as the salvation of Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas no longer actuates and sustains. In Gravity's Rainbow, which, as Richard Schickel states, "is not about the paranoid vision, but is one--a labyrinthine, closed system that is . . . an example in

itself of what it's talking about,"⁶ paranoia is paranothalia with few redeeming attributes. The dominant condition of the passed-over, paranoia enables ordinary people to detect the on-going liaisons between General Electric, Shell, IG Farben, Siemens and other industrial/scientific corporations and to decipher in Their activities the cooperative movement toward death; a method of perceiving connections, it is "perhaps a route in for those . . . who are held at the edge . . ." (GR, 703). Paranoia allows the Preterite to glimpse the power of the System and to project blame by identifying at whose mercy they are.

However, paranoia rarely offers fuel for action in the form of a vitalizing and animating paranoid quest; it does not result in the personal commitment and striving which purchase redemption. Paranoia paralyzes the characters of Gravity's Rainbow. Sapping the strength and draining the will, it does not provide escape from the System but renders its victims more susceptible to assimilation as docile, pliable tools for the death-masters.

Pynchon's third novel depicts an accretion of paranoid paralyses, of unmade moves and failed moments; it reveals how passivity at the various interfaces of their lives damns most of the major characters to manipulation within and by Their systems of control. Of the author's

⁶Richard Schickel, "Paranoia at Full Cry," World, 10 April 1973, p. 44.

metaphoric usage of the term "interface," Marjorie Kaufman states: "By 'interface,' I take Pynchon to mean . . . a partition, a line, not necessarily visible, at which people or things reach their greatest intensity, and at which any attempt to cross may mean repulsion, destruction, or resolution into a new whole. Interfaces abound in Gravity's Rainbow. Everywhere their presence challenges the occupants of the novel to risk a crossing. And by their acceptance or refusal, we shall know them."⁷ Action at the interface demands the abandonment of security and comfortable illusions and the acceptance of dangers which could lead to self-destruction. The characters of the novel will not risk the crossing, and that refusal sentences them certainly and irrevocably to a precarious thinness, a leukemia of soul (GR, 658) and to Their slow death.

Among Pynchon's damned are Pirate Prentice and Katje Borgesius, who are without true commitment to any cause or country and the willing tools of those who use them. Subsisting on illusions of usefulness, self-control and a carefully preserved humanity, they refuse to break from Them: Pirate from the Firm and Katje from the various They who manipulate her. When forced to confront the truth of their lives and selves, both mask the horror and withdraw

⁷Marjorie Kaufman, "Brünnhilde and the Chemists: Women in Gravity's Rainbow," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), p. 227, n. 5.

into further illusions, condemned finally to drift and dissolve.

As Pirate turns informer, he suddenly realizes "it will be possible, after all, to die in obscurity, without having helped a soul: without love, despised, never trusted, never vindicated--to stay down among the Preterite, his poor honor lost, impossible to locate or to redeem" (GR, 544). Sentenced to survive in the Dantesque Inferno of double agents and political defectors, the soon-to-be-contracted-for Prentice is reduced to fear for his personal safety; he's "full of worry for nothing but his own ass, his precious, condemned, personal ass . . ." (GR, 544).

Like her sometimes lover, Katje, too, carries with her a sense of doom. Rejecting freedom when dropped from the Dutch underground, she continues in Their service, losing herself through countless betrayals as double and perhaps triple agent, until finally she has been stripped of all human emotion. As much victimized as victimizer, Katje can be seen "standing at the end of a passage in her life, without any next step to take--all her bets are in, she has only the tedium now of being knocked from one room to the next, a sequence of numbered rooms whose numbers do not matter, till inertia brings her to the last. That's all" (GR, 209). Hoping time remains to atone for a lifetime of easy work, cheap exits and a refusal to go all the way in (GR, 662), she, with Pirate, joins the Counterforce in a

last-ditch effort to redeem herself.

But the Counterforce is another of Their comfortable illusions; by denying its original intentions and thereafter becoming organized and bureaucratized, it is gradually annexed to the System. Katje and Prentice trade only forms of servitude. He is last seen flying a hijacked P-47, lifting "his long, his guilty, his permanently enslaved face to the illusion of sky" (GR, 548), while she accompanies Enzian to the reassembly of the 00000, employing "any technique her crepe-paper and spider-italics young ladyhood ever taught her, to keep from having to move into his blackness . . . an inadmissible darkness she is making believe for the moment is Enzian's" (GR, 661). Noncommittal and compliant, comments Marjorie Kaufman, they still "fail to break away, enchained not only by 'Their' orders and a certain pride in an illusory success as double agents, but also by a blindness to the fact that the self each so secretly harbors has already suffered a death of the heart, 'a leeching of the soul.'" ⁸ As double agents nobody wants and nobody will ever love, Katje and Prentice must "dissolve now, into the race and swarm of this dancing Preterition" (GR, 548).

Political agent Vaslav Tchitcherine of Soviet Intelligence, who has failed throughout his career to achieve

⁸"Brünnhilde and the Chemists," pp. 222-23.

a romantic ideal of selfless and active dedication to cause, falls short at the one great moment of his life and thereafter engages in a quest to destroy his black half-brother in a futile attempt to negate his own preterition.

Haunted by images of true men of action, Tchitcherine "is bound, in love and bodily fear, to students who have died under the wheels of carriages, to eyes betrayed by nights without sleep and arms that have opened maniacally to death by absolute power. He envies their loneliness, their willingness to go it alone, outside even a military structure, often without support or love from anyone;" but if enraptured by such romantic torment and isolation, Tchitcherine is unwilling to risk existence apart from Soviet control, and "his own faithful network of fräuleins around the Zone is a compromise: he knows there's too much comfort in it, even when the intelligence inputs are good. But the perceptible hazards of love, of attachment, are still light enough for him to accept, when balanced against what he has to do" (GR, 338). What he must do, and fails to do during his exile in Central Asia, is gamble everything, even his life, at a moment of decision.

Tchitcherine does not attain his spiritual rebirth at the Kirghiz Light. Confronting an interface which demands total surrender to the unknown and a willingness to allow the shattering of an unreal self, Tchitcherine refuses the experience. Later, wandering through Germany, the

Russian officer suffers the consequences of that refusal: "Tchitcherine is certain. Not so much on outward evidence he has found moving through the Zone as out of a personal doom he carries with him--always to be held at the edges of revelations. It happened first with the Kirghiz Light, and his only illumination then was that fear would always keep him from going all the way in. . . . He will miss the Light, but not the Finger" (GR, 566).

Still Their agent, Tchitcherine, through onerine theophosphate and the hallucinations accompanying the drug, is allowed the small comfort of paranoia. Fleeing extermination by Nikolai Ripov of the Commissariat for Intelligence Activities and persecution by a worldwide Rocket cartel which has denied him membership, the dissipating "Red Doper," increasingly unreal to himself and passively acquiring metal, continues his quest for Enzian in an effort to retrieve an illusory integrity and an election which was never his; he "feels obliged to be on the move, though there's noplac for him to go" (GR, 701). Tchitcherine is finally rescued from disintegration by the love-spell of the witch-like Geli Tripping, which grants his freedom and a meeting with Enzian, during which he begs cigarettes and potatoes and passes him by without recognition.

The one woman who might have shown Franz Pökler an avenue to existence independent of Their control is unable to shatter his apolitical passivity and tractability.

Afraid for his life of Leni's violent Street and incapable of her perilous devotion to revolution, Franz turns to the delusion of transcendence through technology and hunts "between the two desires, personal identity and impersonal salvation" (GR, 406) long enough for Them to gain possession of him as well as his uncanny engineering abilities. When he persists in denying the destructive nature of the A4 he is helping to make operational, Leni abandons him in loathing, and Franz, who "needed to be at someone's command," is left behind, "an unemployed servant who'd go with the first master that called, just a VICTIM IN A VACUUM!" (GR, 414).

The first master who calls is Blicero, and "presently, Pökler found that by refusing to take sides, he'd become Weissmann's best ally" (GR, 401). Bereft of his wife and child, Franz wills his assumption into the Rocket, blinding himself to the ramifications of his technological contributions and refusing to resist Blicero's demands, which would force his release and his expulsion into Leni's unprotective Street: "Pökler knew how to find safety among the indoor abscissas and ordinates of graphs: finding the points he needed not by running the curve itself, not up on high stone and vulnerability, but instead tracing patiently the xs and ys . . . moving always by safe right angles along the faint lines . . ." (GR, 399).

When Blicero plays his trump card--an imprisoned Ilse

released to her father two weeks a year in exchange for continued work on the Rocket--Franz submits to the exquisite torture; as usual, "Pökler chose silence. Had he chosen something else, back while there was time, they all might have saved themselves. Even left the country. Now, too late, when at last he wanted to act, there was nothing to act on" (GR, 409). Existing only for the annual visit to Zwölfkinder with a daughter who may or may not be his own, Franz continues in the shelter of self-delusion, occupying his days with rocketry and forcing a belief that Dora is the benevolent re-education center it is titled.

When at last the true nature of Dora actively penetrates his consciousness, the engineer is forced to admit that "he had known the truth with his senses, but allowed all the evidence to be misfiled where it wouldn't upset him. Known everything, but refrained from the only act that could have redeemed him. He should have throttled Weissmann where he sat" (GR, 428). But Pökler, with his history of untaken moves, simultaneously acknowledges who is the guiltier, for "if he must curse Weissmann, then he must also curse himself. Weissmann's cruelty was no less resourceful than Pökler's own engineering skill, the gift of Daedalus that allowed him to put as much labyrinth as required between himself and the inconveniences of caring" (GR, 428). Channeling his emotions into the inanimate weapon and acquiescing in the manipulation of his

extraordinary talents, Franz fashions a personal vacuum-world in which he can exist without the burden of concern for a wife and child imprisoned in the concentration camp situated just outside his own prison walls.

At another of his moments of possibility, Franz considers giving up his summer-child and abdicating his secure position within Blicero's system. Overwhelmed by a sudden love for Ilse and an almost unendurable sense of guilt and shame, "Pökler committed then his act of courage. He quit the game" (GR, 430). That decision to live on his own terms is short-lived, however. When the rocket-master beckons again, Franz timorously obeys, returning from Zwölfkinder to carry out orders to design a plastic insulated casing for the propulsion section of Rocket 00000.

With the sudden release of Ilse, Pökler receives payment for his retrofit work and is set free from bondage to Blicero, who had been keeping the puppet "deliberately on ice, all so he'd have a plastics man he could depend on, when the time came" (GR, 432). Once again an unemployed servant with no inner resources of his own, Franz drifts aimlessly to Dora, but "he was not looking for Ilse, or not exactly. He may have felt that he ought to look, finally. He was not prepared. He did not know. Had the data, yes, but did not know, with senses or heart . . ." (GR, 432). Too long in retreat from overt action and defiance into illusions of altruistic technological endeavors, he enters

the camp "with hardly any chances left him for good rage, or for turning . . ." (GR, 433). Performing an act of penance which he knows cannot redeem him, he returns to Zwölfkinder to await a daughter who will never return. Mentally traversing the deserted streets and untaken paths of his past, Franz Pökler, who never made his own move, is left finally with no moves to make.

A similar fate is pending for Edward Pointsman, psychologist/director of the Abreaction Research Facility at PISCES. As his name implies, Pointsman pulls the switches which dictate the directions in which others move. Allied firmly with Them, the Pavlovian is unreasonably preoccupied with absolute control; Lance Ozier declares: "Conditioned stimulus and conditioned response is the cornerstone of Pointsman's character, allowing him only a love for experimental manipulation. Control and individual predictability are the ultimate goods in Pointsman's philosophy, and the realm of their application even extends beyond laboratory animals to human beings."⁹ He is, however, as much controlled as controller.

Obsessed with realizing his mentor's ideal of "the true mechanical explanation . . . No effect without cause, and a clear train of linkages" (GR, 89), Pointsman

⁹Lance W. Ozier, "Antipointsman/Antimexico: Some Mathematical Imagery in Gravity's Rainbow," Critique, 16, No. 2 (1974), 77.

unquestioningly and unremittingly accepts the tenets of Pavlov and achieves at the end of his career not a Nobel Prize but an ignoble demise. He is rendered scientifically impotent through a slavish devotion to cause and effect and The Book, Pavlov's second series of Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes, for, as Edward Mendelson states, "this sacred object has, for Pointsman, the effect only of limiting his understanding, forcing his perception of extraordinary events into the sterile categories that Pavlov proposes."¹⁰

With the discovery of Tyrone Slothrop, whose sexual conquests invariably designate sites of future V2 targets, Pointsman is confronted with a paradoxical phenomenon: either the experimental subject who will pave his way to Stockholm or an inexplicable horror who will wreak havoc on Their thought system of cause and effect. Determined to solve the mystery of the penis with predictive powers and to ascribe it, however he must, to infantile conditioning performed by one Laszlo Jamf, Pointsman sees Slothrop as his only salvation from a mediocre career characterized by no noteworthy achievements and leading only to an inglorious end; he decides "the exact experimental subject is in his hands. He must seize now, or be doomed to the same stone hallways, whose termination he knows" (GR, 144). Pointsman

¹⁰ Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), p. 182.

becomes obsessed with making the scientific breakthrough which will account for Slothrop's apparent reversal of cause and effect, obsessed with linking Tyrone's hardon reflex to Pavlov's hypothetical "ultraparadoxical phase," in which a strong stimulus elicits a weak response and vice versa, and, in turn, with proving that stimulus to be inextricably linked to the Rocket. The psychologist informs Roger Mexico that when the stimulus is located, the Pavlovians will "have shown again the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul" (GR, 86). The importance of such a discovery, Mexico is assured, is without question.

But the statistical Antipointsman sees only demonic irrationality in the Pavlovian's logic. With his probabilities, his Poisson distribution map and his insistence that, unlike dogs, bombs are not subject to linkage, conditioning or memory, Mexico threatens to demolish Pointsman's scientific assumptions. He informs the psychologist that even though Slothrop's sexual successes are identical to bomb targets, preceeding them by a mean of four-and-one-half days, it is nonetheless impossible to determine where single bombs will fall next; although a pattern for strike distribution can be predicted, the location of individual future targets cannot be specified. Ozier explains that Roger's Poisson distribution, which describes the V2 strike pattern, can only predict "how many of the 576 squares . . . will have three hits, how many will have two, one, or none,

and cannot tell which particular square will have three, two, one or none."¹¹ If Mexico can live with such randomness and uncertainty in the universe, Pointsman, who "can only possess the zero and the one" (GR, 55), cannot survive without absolute predictability and control.

Roger's probabilities horrify the Pavlovian, for, as Ozier comments, "Pointsman is an experimentalist: the outcome of individual experiments must be predictable, or else science would cease to exist. He quickly and accurately perceives in Mexico's method the assumption that past events have no effect on the outcome of present or future events, a necessary precondition for the application of the Poisson distribution to a particular set of events."¹² The harassed psychologist, pondering the denial of verifiable linkage between rocket strikes, reflex arcs and Laws of Negative Induction, is confronted with an even more devastating truth and "goes in to Mexico each morning as to painful surgery. . . . How can Mexico play, so at his ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent as a child, perhaps unaware--perhaps--that in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico's whole generation have turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but 'events,' newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the

¹¹"Antipointsman/Antimexico," p. 83.

¹²"Antipointsman/Antimexico," p. 85.

end of history?" (GR, 56).

If Mexico is correct, not only has Pointsman more of a phenomenon in Tyrone Slothrop than he has bargained for--an example of Roger's random, unpredictable probabilities, a statistical oddity, on a human scale--but history itself is a jumble of discontinuous, unrelated events. He cannot tolerate either possibility. Much like Herbert Stencil when confronted with Fausto's truth about Lady V., Pointsman arbitrarily closes his mind to Mexico, deciding: "We must never lose control" (GR, 144). Redoubling his efforts, he undertakes a degradingly unprofessional and fanatical campaign to pigeonhole the American lieutenant safely within the realm of cause and effect.

Cause and effect is an artificial system, one of Their man-made thought structures. As the shade of Walter Rathenau insists, speaking from the other side: "'All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic'" (GR, 167). It is a synthetic imposition on nature and Their attempt to order and control. Pointsman's refusal to penetrate the myth, to accept the universe as it exists in randomness and to forego his own need for certainty and manipulation leads him inevitably not to personal glory and scientific achievement but "only his death, that dumb, empty joke, at the end of this Pavlovian's Progress" (GR, 169).

Brainwashed in Their ideology, Pointsman ends his

career in official disgrace; demoted and reduced to a cramped office at Twelfth House for the castration of Major Marvy, he is rendered an ignoble pawn of Pavlov:

For a while he kept a faithful daily record of his physiological changes. But this was mostly remembering about Pavlov on his own deathbed, recording himself till the end. With Pointsman it's only habit, retro-scientism: a last look back at the door to Stockholm, closing behind him forever. . . . In the faces of Mossmoon and the others, at odd moments, he could detect a reflex he'd never allowed himself to dream of: the tolerance of men in power for one who never Made His Move, or made it wrong. . . . he'll be left only with Cause and Effect, and the rest of his sterile armamentarium . . . his mineral corridors do not shine. They will stay the same neutral nameless tone from here in to the central chamber, and the perfectly rehearsed scene he is to play there, after all . . . (GR, 752-53)

Retiring ignominiously, never having glimpsed the coveted Nobel Prize, Pointsman is left with his failure, a lifelong obeisance to the master and The Book. Having refused to renounce both when there was still time, he reflects: "I should . . . should have. . . . There are, in his history, so many of these unmade moves, so many 'should haves'" (GR, 140-41)

Pirate and Katje, Tchitcherine, Pointsman and Franz Pökler, in yielding to systems of control, damn themselves to personal debasement and irrevocable failure. Similarly, the faithless Jessica Swanlake leaves the unknown, risky quantity of the war-child, Roger Mexico, for an eminently safer, "death-by-government," Establishment tool,

Jeremy/Beaver, who "is the War, . . . is every assertion the fucking War has ever made--that we are meant for work and government, for austerity: and these shall take priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses and the other second-class trivia that are found among the idle and mindless hours of the day" (GR, 177). Jessica will assume her position as a subordinate and servile bureaucrat in the System's newly-created vacuum, in the "rationalized power ritual that will be the coming peace" (GR, 177). In his turn, Roger Mexico, confronting the quality of his own submission, wonders "which is worse: living on as Their pet, or death?" He, too, refuses his freedom, decides to live on Their terms and endures a career and a life as one of Their "doomed pet freaks" (GR, 713), a victim of his mother, the War, and his own cowardice.

For the certainty of a secure position and an ostensibly comfortable shelter, all repudiate their freedom and, simultaneously, any chances they might have for self-respect and at least a minimum of personal satisfaction. The fates of Katje, Franz, Pointsman and the others illustrate that those who refuse action at the interface, who are unwilling to accept the challenge of independence and who preserve their unrippled lives through an alliance with Them, find those lives ultimately rendered so empty and valueless as to be unworth living. The fate of Tyrone Slothrop reveals, however, that living outside the System entails dangers and

consequences which may prove no less deadly. After Slothrop makes his successful escape from Them, he steadily disintegrates in the chaos of the Zone.

As a Calvinist carry-over from ancestors who gradually lost "the numinous certainty of God" (GR, 242), Tyrone Slothrop, an American lieutenant stationed in London, has a peculiar "Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia" (GR, 188). During the Blitz, when the soundless V2 announces its arrival only after exacting its toll of dead, paranoia enables him to rationalize the irrational malevolence through an obsession "with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it--if they're really set on getting him ('They' embracing possibilities far beyond Nazi Germany) that's the surest way, doesn't cost them a thing to paint his name on every one, right?" (GR, 25). That same paranoia, when a concatenation of events reveals him to be the target of malicious plots, propels him on a quest across Europe which allows him to elude Their grasp.

While on the Riviera, Slothrop "could almost swear he's being followed, or watched anyway" (GR, 114). With the suspicious carryings-on of Teddy Bloat, the abrupt intrusion of Katje, an octopus and an all-too-convenient crab, Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck's unexpected crash course in rocketry, the theft of his clothes and identification certificates and the mysterious disappearance of his only friend,

he becomes certain They are active but is equally "sure that whatever They want, it won't mean risking his life, or even too much of his comfort" (GR, 207). That sense of relative well-being is shattered, however, when he comes across a secret document concerning an Imipolex insulation device for a unique A4, a discovery which leaves him "with a puzzle, kind of a, well not an obsession really . . . not yet" (GR, 242). With the sudden news of Tantivy Mucker-Maffick's death, Slothrop is convinced Their designs are not as innocuous as he had thought and determines to escape.

Under the nom de guerre of Ian Scuffling, Slothrop flees the Riviera, gathering as he goes information which links the Imipolex inventor, Laszlo Jamf, to "Uncle Lyle" Bland, onetime board member of the Slothrop Paper Company, and Bland to the financing of his own Harvard education. Sensing a correlation between a haunting smell and the "something" which was once done to him in a darkened room, Slothrop begins a paranoid quest to unravel the secret of the S-Gerät and his own relationship to the Rocket.

Pursued by the English, Russians, exiled Africans and who-knows-who-else, Slothrop, variously disguised as war correspondent Ian Scuffling, movie star Max Schlepzig, Rocketman and pig hero Plechazunga, undertakes a frenetic escape from Them and toward the Rocket, which leads him from Nice to Geneva, Zurich, the Mittelwerke at Nordhausen, Berlin, the Potsdam Conference, Peenemünde and Swinemünde,

Zwölfkinder and Cuxhaven. Racing in and out of preposterous situations--an aerial cream pie fight, a sea-going Nazi orgy, a search for a suicidal lemming, a hashish heist, an unexpected meeting with Mickey Rooney, a daring rescue of a German porno-film director, a ramrodding of black marketeers and a tête-à-tête with an amorous pig--Tyrone manages to stay always a few steps ahead of Them. But, drifting about, hiding out and running from town to town, he also begins to suffer the consequences of his successful escape.

Soon after his entry into the Zone, Slothrop begins to manifest symptoms of dissolution. He grows "less anxious about betraying those who trust him. He feels obligations less immediately. There is, in fact, a general loss of emotion, a numbness he ought to be alarmed at, but can't quite . . ." (GR, 490-91). Just as that emotional paralysis results in the betrayal and ultimate death of Bianca, it also contributes to his lapse from an animating and preserving paranoia into anti-paranoia, "where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (GR, 434).

So anti-paranoid does Slothrop grow that, as his fear of Them subsides, his quest devolves into directionless meanderings. The onetime, full-time obsession with the Rocket resurfaces only sporadically, at which instances the increasingly attenuated lieutenant wonders: "Yeah! yeah what happened to Imipolex G, all that Jamf a-and that S-Gerät,

s'posed to be a hardboiled private eye here, gonna go out all alone and beat the odds, avenge my friend that They killed, get my ID back and find that piece of mystery hardware but now aw it's JUST LIKE--LOOK-IN' FAWR A NEEDLE IN A HAAAAY-STACK!" (GR, 561). Breaking into ludicrous songs, Slothrop cannot sustain or, finally, even remember his purpose for being in the Zone.

An example of Kurt Mondaugen's "Personal Density/Temporal Bandwidth Law" in operation (GR, 509), he also forgets who he is and from where he has come. Memories of his youth in the Berkshires are lost, and his relationship with his parents is transformed into a garish fantasy of Naughty Nalline and Pernicious Pop (who steals the Radiant Hour) vs. the Floundering Four, in a series of adventures titled "Paternal Peril" (GR, 675). Soon enough even these comicbook images fade as Broderick and Nalline dissolve into "ssshhhghhhh . . . (into what? What was that word? Whatever it is, the harder he chases, the faster it goes away)" (GR, 682). Mentally orphaned, his paranoia depleted, his identity stolen by Them, his past forgotten and his future--the Rocket--increasingly unimportant and irrelevant to him, to Slothrop remains a vacuous present consisting of numerous sexual encounters with nameless women who are rapidly forgotten during an aimless hegira through the Zone.

Controlled by no one, responsible to and for no one, Slothrop is absolutely free of the System, but his

liberation from Them has been purchased at the cost of his self. Edward Mendelson clarifies his abstraction and demise:

Slothrop's disintegration at the end of the book . . . is not the work of those who oppose or betray him, but is the consequence of his own betrayals, his own loss of interest in the world, his own failures to relate and connect. . . . when he has entered his isolation in the Zone, his sense that acts have consequences in time begins to diminish; he forgets that he exists in a realm of responsibility where relations extend into the past and future. . . . Separated by his own escape and his own empty freedom from an originating past or a future to which he could be responsible, Slothrop can only diminish and disintegrate. As his "temporal bandwidth"--the degree to which he "dwell[s] in the past and in the future"--diminishes, so must all his relations to the world.¹³

Failing to maintain his paranoid quest and oblivious to any form of personal commitment or sense of responsibility, Slothrop becomes "one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell--stripped. Scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be 'found' again, in the conventional sense of 'positively identified and detained'" (GR, 712). His acquaintances are unable to see him as any sort of integral creature, and even Pig Bodine dismisses him with a blood-soaked John Dillinger good-luck-charm and a "Rocketman, Rocketman. You poor fucker" (GR, 741). The System loses all interest in him, and the Counterforce designed for his rescue betrays him, contending: "'We were never that concerned

¹³"Gravity's Encyclopedia," pp. 183-84.

with Slothrop qua Slothrop'" (GR, 738). Of use to no one, even himself, Slothrop vanishes into the Zone; his Tarot indicates his fate with "the cards of a tanker and a feeb: they point only to a long and scuffling future, to mediocrity . . . to no clear happiness or redeeming cataclysm. All his hopeful cards are reversed" (GR, 738). At last sight, Slothrop is covered by the Fool, the only card in the deck without a designated place or number.

Although the unfortunate end of Tyrone Slothrop might appear to suggest it, Gravity's Rainbow does not, as Edward Mendelson states, propose that it is impossible to live outside "the systems of pain and control that occupy and shape the world . . . that it is impossible to escape those systems yet retain any decency, memory, or even life--just as it is impossible to escape from language yet communicate."¹⁴ Although freedom from the System imposes dangers and hardships few are willing to take upon themselves, it is nonetheless a real possibility, as the story of Leni Pökler illustrates. Amidst the accumulation of failed lives of the passive and the disintegration of Slothrop, Leni stands out as the rarity she is. Understanding how They subjugate for Their purposes, she will not yield to manipulation, and, at the interface of her life, she accepts the challenge to act, resists Them and breaks

¹⁴"Gravity's Encyclopedia," p. 169.

free. Preserving both her revolutionary dedication and a sense of responsibility for her child's welfare, Leni Pökler survives actively and meaningfully without submitting either to Their controls or Their comforts. She is the finest of few examples of integrity within the world of Gravity's Rainbow.

As an activist in the suppressed Communist Revolution, Leni embraces the openness to danger demanded by the true revolutionary; she accepts as an unavoidable risk of her commitment the violence of the Street and "the impossibility of any rest . . . needing to trust strangers who may be working for the police, if not right now then a little later, when the street has grown for them more desolate than they can bear" (GR, 158). Leni is reconciled to the possibility of death as a consequence of her opposition to Them.

When her apolitical and cowardly husband questions what appears to him as foolhardy fanaticism, Leni attempts an explanation of the inexplicable: "She tried to explain to him about the level you reach, with both feet in, when you lose your fear, you lose it all, you've penetrated the moment, slipping perfectly into its grooves . . . She even tried, from what little calculus she'd picked up, to explain it to Franz as Δt approaching zero, eternally approaching, the slices of time growing thinner and thinner, a succession of rooms each with walls more silver,

transparent, as the pure light of the zero comes nearer" (GR, 158-59).

Although Franz denies the accuracy of the application, the delta-t-approaching-zero metaphor serves to signify a transformation achieved at the very instant of personal commitment, the moment at which past events and future consequences dissolve as the self is shed in the acceptance of that moment's possibilities. George Levine observes that the willingness to risk a crossing from the delta-t into the pure zero is "an act of faith because the primary restraining fact is the terror of what lies beyond The possible act is, simply, acceptance of the moment on its own terms."¹⁵ True acceptance necessitates that Leni eschew Franz's kind of security and order; to achieve the pure present of the delta-t, she must renounce the rational, predictable world of her husband.

Since Franz refuses to forsake his passive alliance with Them, Leni abandons him to the sheltered comfort of his vacuum-world, understanding that "her wings can only carry her own weight, and she hopes Ilse's, for a while. Franz is a dead weight. Let him look for flight out at the Raketenflugplatz, where he goes to be used by the military and the cartels" (GR, 162-63). Dreaming of the charitably

¹⁵George Levine, "Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), p. 128.

and equitably coexisting world that might have been with Rosa Luxemburg at the helm, but facing squarely the reality of what is, Leni takes her daughter to confront whatever awaits in the Street, knowing "the best there is to believe in right now is a Revolution-in-exile-in-residence, a continuity, surviving at the bleak edge over these Weimar years, waiting its moment and its reincarnated Luxemburg" (GR, 155).

In the Street and, later, in the concentration camp, Leni does whatever she must to insure the survival of herself and her daughter. When starvation threatens, she resorts to prostitution. With an eye to the future, she feigns hardness and maternal indifference to force Ilse's independence and toughness; determined not to have the daughter a puppet like the father, "she knows what she has to impersonate. Especially with Ilse watching her more. Ilse is not going to be used" (GR, 156). Marjorie Kaufman comments: "In bitter paradox, while the dead of Gravity's Rainbow try desperately to impersonate the living, Leni, to live and to give life to her child, understands she must play the dead-at-heart."¹⁶ Biding her time, she endures the pain and imprisonment which result from her decision to live on her own terms outside Their dictates and comforts.

But Leni does survive. As a masseuse in Cuxhaven

¹⁶"Brünnhilde and the Chemists," p. 219.

after the Armistice, she is "Solange," from the German word for "so long as." As long as necessary, she will continue in her self-imposed and arduous exile from the System. At whatever cost, she remains convinced of the rightness of the revolutionary cause and dedicated to its goals, awaiting the next delta-t to be confronted. Meanwhile, her integrity and self-denial have their rewards to offer, for Ilse, too, will survive--precariously but independently in the Street; as Leni has dreamed, she will not be used (GR, 610).

Leni Pökler grasps her opportunity for action. Determined to create her own kind of order, she opts for the hazards which necessarily accompany a decision for freedom, responsibility, commitment and self-control. Leni shuns the cold comfort of Their System for an infinitely more difficult life on her own terms. Seizing as she can those "few small chances for mercy" (GR, 610), she realizes, through an active resistance to the world's dehumanizing and annihilistic forces, a measure of personal achievement and reward and a purposeful existence in the interim before the death of the world, before the parousia which is the price of passivity.

FOR BETTER OR WORSE: WHEN EVEN THE BEST IS BAD

"'What's that about the Apocalypse?'"

--Herman Melville,
The Confidence-Man--

In Gravity's Rainbow emerge all the themes of Thomas Pynchon's earlier fiction. His third novel is the nihilistic dead-end point towards which his works and his imagination have been building throughout his short stories, V. and The Crying of Lot 49. Recapitulating motifs introduced during seven years of increasingly despair-ridden writing, Pynchon's vision in his most recent work is supremely dire, and with a bombed-out, war-torn world encapsulating his pessimism, the author reveals the absolute hegemony of V.'s kingdom of death. Hugh Godolphin's private annihilistic dream has been so thoroughly adopted and actualized that nothing worldly remains for man's defilement. Contemporary man--the Whole Sick Crew made large-scale--has so effectively promoted inanimacy and death on earth that, with his mania for destruction still unappeased, he is compelled to gaze skyward and wonder: "'Will our new Edge, our new Deathkingdom, be the Moon?'" (GR, 723).

Reiterating the concerns first presented in his short stories, Pynchon, in his massive third novel, confirms

and concretizes his previous judgment of the earth, leaving his prediction for its future unchanged. Gravity's Rainbow is a diagnosis, brought up-to-date, of the Wasteland contagion revealed in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna;" Blicero's Rilkean redemption from the infectious and deadly earthly cycle is but Cleanth Siegel's messianic cleansing universalized. Sidney Stencil's old fears of sudden Apocalypse prove prophetic, after all, as the Nameless Horror, the Rocket 00000, descends, and the last delta-t looms but a hymn away.

Gravity's Rainbow concludes, if more dramatically and cataclysmically, with the same utter hopelessness which reigns on the last page of "Entropy," where "a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion" (Entropy, 292) settle surely over a horrified, hothouse-withdrawn Callisto and where Meatball Mulligan struggles vainly in a world trembling on the brink of total disintegration. In Gravity's Rainbow, the Mulligan-like Leni Pökler also resides in a Wasteland whose end is irrevocably determined and rapidly approaching. Just as her predecessor rejects the dark shelter of the closet for the chaos of the entropical party-world, so Leni denies the System to labor futilely in a world in which the heat-death, the paralyzing equilibrium initiated by the earth's Inverarity/dynamos, has been superseded by Their more ingenious and atrocious methods of self-destruction. The end is at hand, and even

the best of Pynchon's delineated alternatives to the Wasteland will not deter it. Throughout human history, the Meatball Mulligans and the Leni Pöklers have been too few to divert the course of an annihilation-prone universe, and Armageddon has been born of a modern tendency to non-resistance and passive participation.

In Katje Borgesius, Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake, Franz Pökler, Tchitcherine and Ned Pointsman, Pynchon reincarnates such early characters as Dennis Flange, Benny Profane and Fausto II and III, Callisto, Sidney Stencil, the Tristero conspirators and all the inactive souls who have damned themselves and their world through retreat, whether into subterranean shelters, dreams, hothouse delusions or stifling systems of order and control. The life-sustaining Spartacan-Stencilian-Oedipal quest for vitality and personal identity in a meaningful reinvented universe has been abandoned; the arduous active response to the Wasteland, with its implicit pains and commitments, has been shunned for the numbing and deadly comfort bought with acquiescence. While the death-masters have been constructing monster machines and structures for the dehumanization and ultimate destruction of the world, the passive have allowed, if not applauded, Their annihilistic endeavors and have relinquished their opportunities for autonomy for voluntary enslavement to the products of Their pursuits.

Having renounced the perpetual struggle for freedom

and self-determination, refused to make the continuous efforts demanded by love and humanity and timorously rejected the challenge of uncertainty lying outside the parameters of Their imposed standards and supervision, the inactive have chosen alliance with security and have opted for death-in-life existences; they have settled for incarceration in Oedipa's pre-quest tower, Stencil's pre-V. kingdom of death, and have watched in horror and paralyzed paranoia as all meaning and value vanished from their lives and the universe. Confronted with the chaos and corruption of a Wasteland born of their refusals to act, of their capitulation to non-resistance, they have witnessed the earth's devolvment to a stagnant steady-state of degradation and disease. And now, as the 00000 truly legitimizes the Lord of Night and bleaches the Wasteland to ultrawhite, the best response is no longer good enough. Inactivity has finally bred Apocalypse.

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

WORKS BY THOMAS PYNCHON

- The Crying of Lot 49. 1966; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.
- "Entropy." Kenyon Review, 22 (1960), 277-92.
- Gravity's Rainbow, paperback. New York: Viking Press, 1973.
- "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts." New York Times Magazine, 12 June 1966, pp. 34-35, 78, 80-82, 84.
- "Low-lands." New World Writing, No. 16 (1960), pp. 85-108.
- "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna." Epoch, 9 (Spring, 1959), 195-213.
- "The Secret Integration." Saturday Evening Post, 237 (19 December 1964), 36, 39, 42-44, 46-49, 51.
- "The Shrink Flips." Cavalier, 16 (March, 1966), 32-33, 88-92.
- "The Small Rain." Cornell Writer, 6, No. 2 (March, 1959), 14-32.
- "Under the Rose." Noble Savage, No. 3 (1961), pp. 223-51.
- V. 1963; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1964.
- "The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity." Esquire, 64 (December, 1965), 170-73, 296, 298-303.

BOOKS

- Adams, Henry. The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma. Introduction and commentary by Brooks Adams. 1919; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1949.
- _____. The Education of Henry Adams. Ed. Ernest Samuels. 1918; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974.

- . A Letter to American Teachers of History.
Baltimore: J. H. Furst Co., 1910.
- . Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. Introduction by
Ralph Adams Cram. 1913; rpt. Garden City, New York:
Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959.
- Baumbach, Jonathan. The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in
the Contemporary American Novel. New York: New York
University Press, 1965.
- Bergonzi, Bernard. The Situation of the Novel. Pittsburgh:
University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970.
- Berthoff, Warner. Fictions and Events: Essays in Criticism
and Literary History. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co.,
1971.
- Brillouin, Leon. Science and Information Theory. New York:
Academic Press, 1956.
- Brown, Norman O. Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical
Meaning of History. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan
University Press, 1959.
- Bryant, Jerry. The Open Decision: The Contemporary American
Novel and Its Intellectual Background. New York: The
Free Press, 1970.
- Campbell, Joseph. The Masks of God: Creative Mythology.
New York: Viking Press, 1968.
- Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text,
Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism. A
Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New
York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963.
- Dampier, Sir William Cecil. A History of Science and Its
Relations With Philosophy and Religion. 3rd ed., rev.
and enl., 1942; rpt. New York: Macmillan Co., 1946.
- Eliot, T. S. T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays,
1909-1950. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952.
- Fariña, Richard. Long Time Coming and a Long Time Gone.
New York: Random House, 1963.
- Fasel, George. Modern Europe in the Making, From the
French Revolution to the Common Market. New York:
Dodd, Mead and Co., 1974.

- Feidelson, Charles, Jr. Symbolism and American Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.
- Feinberg, Leonard. The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1963.
- Finocchiaro, Maurice A. History of Science as Explanation. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973.
- Frye, Northrop. T. S. Eliot. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Galloway, David D. The Absurd Hero in American Fiction: Updike, Styron, Bellow, and Salinger. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1966.
- Gatlin, Lila L. Information Theory and the Living System. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.
- Hacker, Andrew. The End of the American Era. New York: Atheneum Press, 1970.
- Harris, Charles B. Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd. New Haven: College and University Press, 1971.
- Hassan, Ihab. Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Hauck, Richard Boyd. A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.
- Henderson, Harry B., III. Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Hoffman, Frederick J. The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964.
- Howe, Irving. Decline of the New. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970.
- Hoyle, Martha Byrd. A World in Flames: A History of World War II. New York: Atheneum Press, 1970.
- Hyman, Stanley Edgar. Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time. New York: Horizon Press, 1966.

Kazin, Alfred. Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973.

Kermode, John Frank. The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Klein, Marcus. After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century. 1964; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970.

Koestler, Arthur. The Roots of Coincidence. New York: Vintage Press, 1973.

Laszlo, Ervin. Introduction to Systems of Philosophy: Toward a New Paradigm of Contemporary Thought. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973.

Lehan, Richard. A Dangerous Crossing. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.

Lewis, R. W. B. Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. The Prince. Introduction by Christian Gauss. Trans. Luigi Ricci. 1903; rev. and rpt. New York: The American Library of World Literature, 1952.

Marcuse, Herbert. One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

May, John R. Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972.

Miller, James E., Jr. Quests Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

Olderman, Raymond M. Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen Sixties. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.

Poirer, Richard. The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

_____. A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views. Ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963.

Reza, Fazlollah M. An Introduction to Information Theory. McGraw-Hill Electrical and Electronic Engineering Series. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961.

Richter, David H. Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Rilke, Ranier Maria. Duino Elegies. Trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender. 1939; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967.

Rolleston, James. Rilke in Translation: An Exploration of His Earliest Poetry. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

Samuels, Ernest. Henry Adams: The Major Phase. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964.

Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism. Ed. Ronald Paulson. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971.

Scholes, Robert. The Fabulators. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Schulz, Max F. Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1973.

_____. Radical Sophistication: Studies in Contemporary Jewish-American Novelists. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969.

Shannon, Claude E., and Warren Weaver. The Mathematical Theory of Communication. 1949; rpt. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1964.

Slade, Joseph. Thomas Pynchon. Writers for the 70's Series. New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974.

Sypher, Wylie. Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art. New York: Vintage Books, 1962.

Tanner, Tony. City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Weinberg, Helen. The New Novel in America: The Kafkan Mode in Contemporary Fiction. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970.

Weiner, Norbert. The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1950.

ESSAYS AND ARTICLES IN A COLLECTION

Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion," in The American Novel Since World War II. A Fawcett Premier Book. Ed. with an introduction by Marcus Klein. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1969, 267-79.

Feldman, Burton. "Anatomy of Black Humor," in The American Novel Since World War II. A Fawcett Premier Book. Ed. with an introduction by Marcus Klein. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1969, 224-28.

Fiedler, Leslie. "The Higher Sentimentality," in The American Novel Since World War II. A Fawcett Premier Book. Ed. with an introduction by Marcus Klein. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1969, 229-44.

Friedman, Bruce Jay. "Foreword," in Black Humor. Ed. with a Foreword by Bruce Jay Friedman. New York: Bantam Books, 1965, vii-xi.

Heller, Erich. "The Realistic Fallacy," in Documents of Modern Literary Realism. Ed. George J. Becker. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, 591-98.

Howe, Irving. "Introduction: The Idea of the Modern," in The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts. Ed. with an introduction and commentary by Irving Howe. New York: Horizon Press, 1967, 11-40.

Hunt, John W. "Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: The Novels of Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon," in Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature. Ed. with an introduction by Nathan A. Scott, Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, 87-112.

Kaufman, Marjorie. "Brünnhilde and the Chemists: Women in Gravity's Rainbow," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976, 197-227.

Kostelanetz, Richard. "American Fiction of the Sixties," in On Contemporary Literature. Discus Books. Ed. with an introductory essay by Richard Kostelanetz. 1964; rpt. and ex. New York: Avon Publishing Co., 1969, 634-52.

_____. "The New American Fiction," in The New American Arts. Ed. Richard Kostelanetz. 1965; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1967, 194-236.

Leverenz, David. "On Trying to Read Gravity's Rainbow," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976, 229-49.

Levine, George. "Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976, 113-36.

_____, and David Leverenz. "Introduction: Mindful Pleasures," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976, 3-11.

McConnell, Frank D. "Thomas Pynchon," in Contemporary Novelists. Ed. James Vinson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972, 1033-36.

Mendelson, Edward. "Gravity's Encyclopedia," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976, 161-95.

_____. "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," in Individual and Community: Variations on a Theme in American Fiction. Ed. Kenneth H. Baldwin and David K. Kirby. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1975, 182-222.

Phillips, William. "Notes on the New Style," in The American Novel Since World War II. A Fawcett Premier Book. Ed. with an introduction by Marcus Klein. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1969, 252-61.

Scholes, Robert. "'Mithridates, he died old': Black Humor and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," in The Sounder Few: Essays From the Hollins Critic. Ed. R. H. Dillard et al. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971, 173-93.

Scott, Nathan A., Jr. "The 'Conscience' of the New Literature," in The Shaken Realist: Essays in Modern Literature in Honor of Frederick J. Hoffman. Ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970, 251-83.

Stimpson, Catharine R. "Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism: Thomas Pynchon's Early Fiction," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Ed. George Levine and David Leverenz. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976, 31-47.

"Thomas Pynchon," in Contemporary Authors: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Works, 19-20. Ed. James M. Ethridge et al. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1968, 352-54.

"Thomas Pynchon," in Contemporary Literary Criticism, 2. Ed. Carolyn Riley and Barbara Harte. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1968, 353-58.

"Thomas Pynchon," in A Library of Literary Criticism: Modern American Literature, 3. 4th ed. Ed. Dorothy Nyren Curley et al. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1969, 35-38.

PERIODICAL ARTICLES AND NEWSPAPER REVIEWS

Abernethy, Peter L. "Entropy in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49." Critique, 14, No. 2 (1972), 18-33.

Allen, Bruce. "Thomas Pynchon." Library Journal, 98 (1 March 1973), 766.

Alter, Robert. "The Apocalyptic Temper." Commentary, 41 (June, 1966), 61-66.

"American Fiction: The Postwar Years, 1945-1965." Book Week--The Washington Post, 26 September 1965, pp. 1-8, 12, 14, 18, 20, 22, 24-29.

"Backstage with Esquire." Esquire, 64 (December, 1965), 10.

Balliett, Whitney. "Wha." New Yorker, 39 (15 June 1963), 113-14, 117.

Bellow, Saul. "Facts That Put Fancy to Flight." New York Times Book Review, 11 February 1962, pp. 1, 28.

_____. "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction." Encounter, 21 (1963), 22-29.

- Berolzheimer, Hobart F. "The Crying of Lot 49." Library Journal, 91 (15 March 1966), 1447.
- Brackman, Joseph. "The Put-On." New Yorker, 24 June 1967, pp. 34-73.
- Buckeye, Robert. "The Anatomy of the Psychic Novel." Critique, 9, No. 2 (1967), 33-44.
- Burrows, Miles. "Paranoid Quests." New Statesman, 73 (14 April 1967), 513-14.
- Byrd, Scott. "A Separate War: Camp and Black Humor in Recent American Fiction." Language Quarterly, 7, Nos. 1-2 (Fall-Winter, 1968), 7-10.
- Callow, Phillip. "All Agog." Books and Bookmen, 12 (June, 1967), 20.
- Clemons, Walter. "The Sky's the Limit." Newsweek, 19 March 1973, p. 92A.
- Cowart, David. "Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and the Paintings of Remedios Varo." Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977), 19-26.
- "The Crying of Lot 49." Playboy, April, 1966, pp. 25-26.
- "The Crying of Lot 49." Publisher's Weekly, 191 (13 March 1967), 62.
- Davis, Douglas. "'The New Mood': An Obsession with the Absurd." National Observer, 15 February 1965, p. 22.
- Davis, Robert Murray. "Parody, Paranoia, and the Dead End of Language in The Crying of Lot 49." Genre, 5 (1972), 367-77.
- _____. "The Shrinking Garden and New Exits: The Comic-Satiric Novel in the Twentieth Century." Kansas Quarterly, 1, No. 3 (Summer, 1969), 5-16.
- Dickstein, Morris. "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties." Partisan Review, 43, No. 2 (1976), 185-211.
- Donadio, Stephen. "America, America." Partisan Review, 33, No. 3 (1966), 448-52.
- Edinborough, Arnold. "Random Harvest." Saturday Night, 81 (August, 1966), 25-26.

- Ehrenberg, W. "Maxwell's Demon." Scientific American, 217, No. 5 (November, 1967), 103-10.
- Fahy, Joseph. "Thomas Pynchon's V. and Mythology." Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977), 5-18.
- "Faulkner Novel Award Given." New York Times, 3 February 1964, p. 25.
- Feldman, Irving. "Keeping Cool." Commentary, 36 (September, 1963), 258-60.
- French, Michael R. "The American Novel in the Sixties." Midwest Quarterly, 9 (July, 1968), 365-79.
- Friedman, Alan J., and Manfred Puetz. "Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and Gravity's Rainbow." Contemporary Literature, 15, No. 3 (Summer, 1974), 345-59.
- Friedman, Bruce Jay. "Those Clowns of Conscience." Book Week--The Washington Post, 18 July 1965, pp. 2, 7.
- Friedrich, Otto. "Clover and Henry Adams--A Most Unusual Love Story." Smithsonian, April, 1977, pp. 58-64, 66-67.
- Gaines, Ervin J. "Reviews." Library Journal, 88 (15 February 1963), 795-96.
- Gary, Romain. "Genghis Cohn." New York Times Book Review, 12 June 1966, p. 35.
- "Going, Going, Gone!" Newsweek, 67 (2 May 1966), 104, 106.
- Gold, Arthur R. "Like a Yo-Yo Spinning Through a Dehumanized Age." New York Herald Tribune Books, 21 April 1963, p. 3.
- _____. "A Mad Dash After an Unholy Grail." Book Week--The Washington Post, 24 April 1966, p. 5.
- Golden, Robert E. "Mass Man and Modernism: Violence in Pynchon's V." Critique, 14, No. 2 (1972), 5-17.
- Greenberg, Alvin. "The Novels of Disintegration: Paradoxical Impossibility in Contemporary Fiction." Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 7, No. 1 (Winter-Spring, 1966), 103-24.
- _____. "The Underground Woman: An Excursion into the V-ness of Thomas Pynchon." Chelsea, No. 27 (1969), pp. 58-65.

- Guerard, Albert J. "Saul Bellow and the Activists: On The Adventures of Augie March." Southern Review, No. 3 (1967), pp. 582-96.
- Hall, James. "The New Pleasures of the Imagination." Virginia Quarterly Review, 46 (Autumn, 1970), 596-612.
- Handlin, Oscar. "The Crying of Lot 49." Atlantic Monthly, 217 (May, 1966), 127-28.
- Hartman, Carl. "The Fellowship of the Roles." Contact, No. 15 (July, 1963), pp. 73-75.
- Hassan, Ihab. "The Futility Corner." Saturday Review, 46 (23 March 1963), 44.
- _____. "Laughter in the Dark: The New Voice in American Fiction." American Scholar, 33 (Autumn, 1964), 636-38, 640.
- Hausdorf, Don. "Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities." Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 7, No. 3 (Autumn, 1966), 258-69.
- Hendin, Josephine. "What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?" Harper's, 250 (March, 1975), 82-83, 87-88, 90, 92.
- Henkle, Roger B. "Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall." Modern Fiction Studies, 17, No. 2 (Summer, 1971), 207-20.
- Hertzberg, Hendrik, and David C. K. McClelland. "Paranoia." Harper's, 248 (June, 1974), 51-54, 59-60.
- Herzberg, Bruce. "Selected Articles on Thomas Pynchon: An Annotated Bibliography." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 221-25.
- Hicks, Granville. "A Plot Against the Post Office." Saturday Review, 49 (30 April 1966), 27-28.
- Hill, Hamlin. "Black Humor: Its Causes and Cure." Colorado Quarterly, 17 (1968), 57-64.
- Hoffman, Frederick J. "The Questing Comedian: Thomas Pynchon's V.." Critique, 6, No. 3 (1963-64), 174-77.
- Janoff, Bruce. "Black Humor: Beyond Satire." Ohio Review, 14, No. 1 (1972), 5-20.
- Kihss, Peter. "Pulitzer Jurors Dismayed on Pynchon." New York Times, 8 May 1974, p. 38.

- Kirby, David K. "Two Modern Versions of the Quest." Southern Humanities Review, 5 (1971), 387-95.
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. "A Final Word for Black Humor." Contemporary Literature, 15, No. 2 (Spring, 1974), 271-76.
- Knickerbocker, Conrad. "Humor with a Mortal Sting." New York Times Book Review, 27 September 1967, p. 3.
- Koch, Stephen. "Imagination in the Abstract." Antioch Review, 24 (Summer, 1964), 253-63.
- Kolodny, Annette, and Daniel James Peters. "Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49: The Novel as Subversive Experience." Modern Fiction Studies, 19, No. 1 (Spring, 1973), 79-87.
- Kostelanetz, Richard. "Dada and the Future of Fiction." Works, 1, No. 3 (1968), 58-66.
- _____. "'New American Fiction' Reconsidered." Tri-Quarterly, No. 8 (1967), pp. 279-86.
- _____. "Notes on the American Short Story Today." Minnesota Review, 5 (1965), 214-21.
- _____. "The Point Is That Life Doesn't Have Any Point." New York Times Book Review, 6 June 1965, pp. 3, 28, 30.
- Krafft, John M. "'And How Far-Fallen': Puritan Themes in Gravity's Rainbow." Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977), 55-73.
- Larner, Jeremy. "The New Schlemihl." Partisan Review, 30, No. 3 (1963), 273-76.
- LeClair, Thomas. "Death and Black Humor." Critique, 17, No. 1 (1975-76), 5-40.
- Lehan, Richard. "The American Novel--A Survey of 1966." Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 8, No. 3 (Summer, 1967), 437-49.
- _____. "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Demonic Quest." Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 1 (Summer, 1959), 181-202.
- Lehman-Haupt, Christopher. "The Adventures of Rocketman." New York Times, 9 March 1973, p. 35.
- _____. "End-of-the-World Machine." New York Times, 3 June 1966, p. 37.

- Leland, John P. "Pynchon's Linguistic Demon: The Crying of Lot 49." Critique, 16, No. 2 (1974), 45-53.
- Leverenz, David. "Letters: Point Counterpoint." Partisan Review, 42, No. 4 (1975), 643-44.
- Levine, George. "V-2." Partisan Review, 40, Nos. 3-4 (1973), 517-29.
- _____, and David Leverenz. "Introduction: Mindful Pleasures." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), iii-v.
- Levine, Paul. "Easterns and Westerns." Hudson Review, 16 (Autumn, 1963), 455-62.
- _____. "The Intemperate Zone: The Climate of Contemporary Fiction." Massachusetts Review, 8, No. 3 (Summer, 1967), 505-23.
- Lhamon, W. T., Jr. "The Most Irresponsible Bastard." New Republic, 168 (14 April 1973), 24-28.
- _____. "Pentecost, Promiscuity, and Pynchon's V.: From the Scaffold to the Impulsive." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 163-76.
- Lindroth, James R. "The Crying of Lot 49." America, 114 (14 May 1966), 700.
- _____. "Gravity's Rainbow." America, 128 (12 May 1973), 446.
- Locke, Richard. "Gravity's Rainbow." New York Times Book Review, 11 March 1973, pp. 1-3, 12-14.
- Lyons, Thomas R., and Allan D. Franklin. "Thomas Pynchon's 'Classic' Presentation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics." Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Language Association, 27 (1972), 195-204.
- Maddocks, Melvin. "Paleface Takeover." Atlantic Monthly, 231 (March, 1973), 98-101.
- Mangel, Anne. "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: The Crying of Lot 49." Tri-Quarterly, No. 20 (Winter, 1971), pp. 194-208.
- McNamara, Eugene. "The Absurd Style in Contemporary American Literature." Humanities Association Bulletin, 19, No. 1 (1968), 44-49.

- Meixner, John A. "The All-Purpose Quest." Kenyon Review, 25 (Autumn, 1963), 729-35.
- Mendelson, Edward. "Pynchon's Gravity." Yale Review, 62, No. 4 (Summer, 1973), 624-31.
- _____. "Rainbow Corner." Times Literary Supplement, 13 June 1975, p. 666.
- Morris, Robert K. "Jumping Off the Golden Gate Bridge." Nation, 217 (16 July 1973), 53-54.
- Morrison, Philip. "Books." Scientific American, 229 (October, 1973), 131.
- Morse, J. Mitchell. "Fiction Chronicle." Hudson Review, 19 (Autumn, 1966), 507-14.
- "A Myth of Alligators." Time, 81 (15 March 1963), 106, 108.
- Nelson, Milton E., Jr. "A Thrust at Truth?" Chicago Tribune Books Today, 8 May 1966, p. 5.
- "Newsmakers." Newsweek, 20 May 1974, p. 69.
- Nichols, Lewis. "In and Out of Books." New York Times Book Review, 28 April 1963, p. 8.
- "Nosepicking Contests." Time, 87 (6 May 1966), 109-10.
- Numasawa, Kōji. "Black Humor: An American Aspect." Studies in English Literature. University of Tokyo, 44 (1968), 177-93.
- Ozier, Lance W. "Antipointsman/Antimexico: Some Mathematical Imagery in Gravity's Rainbow." Critique, 16, No. 2 (1974), 73-90.
- _____. "The Calculus of Transformation: More Mathematical Imagery in Gravity's Rainbow." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 193-210.
- Patteson, Richard. "What Stencil Knew: Structure and Certitude in Pynchon's V." Critique, 16, No. 2 (1974), 30-44.
- Petersen, Clarence. "Personal Choices for Personal Pleasure." Chicago Tribune Books Today, 28 February 1965, p. 13.
- _____. "Some of the Best." Chicago Tribune Books Today, 7 May 1967, p. 9.

"Pieces of What?" Times Literary Supplement, 11 October 1963, p. 813.

Plimpton, George. "Mata Hari With a Clockwork Eye, Alligators in the Sewer." New York Times Book Review, 21 April 1963, p. 5.

Poirer, Richard. "Cook's Tour." New York Review of Books, 1, No. 2 (1963), 32.

_____. "Embattled Underground." New York Times Book Review, 1 May 1966, pp. 5, 42-43.

_____. "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 151-62.

_____. "A Literature of Law and Order." Partisan Review, 36, No. 2 (1969), 189-204.

_____. "The Politics of Self-Parody." Partisan Review, 35, No. 3 (1968), 339-53.

_____. "Rocket Power." Saturday Review, 1 March 1973, pp. 59-64.

Pollock, Venetia. "New Fiction." Punch, 245 (13 November 1963), 722-23.

Price, R. G. G. "New Novels." Punch, 252 (26 April 1967), 618.

Pritchard, William. "Theatre of Operations." New Statesman, 86 (16 November 1973), 734-35.

Richardson, Robert O. "The Absurd Animate in Thomas Pynchon's V.: A Novel." Studies in the Twentieth Century, No. 9 (Spring, 1972), 35-58.

Ricks, Christopher. "Voluminous." New Statesman, 66 (11 October 1963), 492.

Rose, Remington. "At Home With Oedipa Maas." New Republic, 154 (14 May 1966), 39-40.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "One Man's Meat Is Another Man's Poisson." Village Voice, 29 March 1973, pp. 24, 26.

Rosenthal, Raymond. "The Lost Treasure." New Leader, 49 (23 May 1966), 21-22.

Rovit, Earl. "On the Contemporary Apocalyptic Imagination." American Scholar, 37, No. 3 (Summer, 1968), 458-63.

- Rovit, Earl. "Some Shapes in Recent American Fiction." Contemporary Literature, 15, No. 4 (Autumn, 1974), 539-61.
- Sale, Roger. "American Fiction in 1973." Massachusetts Review, 14 (Autumn, 1973), 834-46.
- Sanders, Scott. "Pynchon's Paranoid History." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 177-92.
- _____. "Towards a Social Theory of Literature." Telos, No. 18 (Winter, 1973-74), pp. 107-21.
- Schickel, Richard. "Paranoia at Full Cry." World, 10 April 1973, pp. 43-44.
- Schmitz, Neil. "Describing the Demon: The Appeal of Thomas Pynchon." Partisan Review, 42, No. 1 (1975), 112-25.
- Schulz, Max F. "Pop, Op, and Black Humor: The Aesthetics of Anxiety." College English, 30, No. 3 (December, 1968), 230-41.
- _____. "The Unconfirmed Thesis: Kurt Vonnegut, Black Humor, and Contemporary Art." Critique, 12, No. 3 (1971), 5-28.
- Shapiro, Stephen A. "The Ambivalent Animal: Man in the Contemporary British and American Novel." Centennial Review, 12 (1968), 1-22.
- Shattuck, Roger. "Fiction a la Mode." New York Review of Books, 6, No. 2 (23 June 1966), 22-25.
- Shorris, Earl. "The Worldly Palimpsest of Thomas Pynchon." Harper's, 246 (June, 1973), 78-80, 82.
- Siegel, Jules. "Who Is Thomas Pynchon . . . and Why Did He Take Off With My Wife?" Playboy, March, 1977, pp. 97, 122, 168-70, 172, 174.
- Siegel, Mark R. "Creative Paranoia: Understanding the System of Gravity's Rainbow." Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977), 39-54.
- Simmon, Scott. "A Character Index: Gravity's Rainbow." Critique, 16, No. 2 (1974), 68-72.
- _____. "Gravity's Rainbow Described." Critique, 16, No. 2 (1974), 54-67.

- Sissman, L. E. "Hieronymous and Robert Bosch: The Art of Thomas Pynchon." New Yorker, 49 (19 May 1973), 138-40.
- Skerrett, Joseph Taylor, Jr. "Dostoievsky, Nathanael West, and Some Contemporary American Fiction." University of Dayton Review, 4, No. 1 (1967), 23-36.
- Sklar, Robert. "The New Novel, USA: Thomas Pynchon." Nation, 205 (25 September 1967), 277-80.
- Slade, Joseph W. "Escaping Rationalization: Options for the Self in Gravity's Rainbow." Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977), 27-38.
- Slatoff, Walter. "V.." Epoch, 12 (Spring, 1963), 255-57.
- Tanner, Tony. "Edge City." London Magazine, December, 1969, pp. 5-24.
- Tatham, Campbell. "John Barth and the Aesthetics of Artifice." Contemporary Literature, 12, No. 1 (Winter, 1971), 60-73.
- "Thomas Pynchon." Choice, 10 (June, 1973), 622.
- Thorburn, David. "A Dissent on Pynchon." Commentary, 56 (September, 1973), 68-70.
- Trachtenberg, Stanley. "Beyond Initiation: Some Recent Novels." Yale Review, 56, No. 1 (Autumn, 1966), 131-38.
- _____. "Counterhumor: Comedy in Contemporary American Fiction." Georgia Review, 27, No. 1 (Spring, 1973), 33-48.
- "V for Victory." Newsweek, 61 (1 April 1963), 82, 84.
- "V Signs." Times Literary Supplement, 27 April 1967, p. 364.
- Vandersee, Charles A. "Henry Adams." American Literary Realism, 1870-1910, 2, No. 2 (Summer, 1969), 89-120.
- Vesterman, William. "Pynchon's Poetry." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (May, 1975), 211-20.
- Wagner, Linda W. "A Note on Oedipa the Roadrunner." Journal of Narrative Technique, 4, No. 2 (May, 1974), 155-61.
- "Waiting for the Bang." Times Literary Supplement, 19 November 1973, p. 1389.

- Waldmeir, Joseph. "Only an Occasional Rutabaga: American Fiction Since 1945." Modern Fiction Studies, 15, No. 4 (Winter, 1969-70), 467-81.
- Wasson, Richard. "Notes on a New Sensibility." Partisan Review, 36, No. 3 (1969), 460-77.
- Weixlmann, Joseph. "Thomas Pynchon: A Bibliography." Critique, 14, No. 2 (1972), 34-43.
- Wensberg, Erik. "The Crying of Lot 49." Commonweal, 84 (3 July 1966), 446-48.
- West, Paul. "Perpetuating the Obsolete." Commonweal, 87 (17 November 1967), 203-05.
- Willis, Ronald. "Fiction: On Oddities." Books and Bookmen, 11 (September, 1966), 44-45.
- Winston, Mathew. "The Quest for Pynchon." Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 3 (October, 1975), 278-87.
- Wolff, Geoffrey. "Gravity's Rainbow." Book World--The Washington Post, 11 March 1973, pp. 1-2.
- Wood, Michael. "Rocketing to the Apocalypse." New York Review of Books, 20, No. 4 (22 March 1973), 22-23.
- Wood, Percy. "Sophisticated Saga of Benny Profane." Chicago Tribune Magazine of Books, 14 April 1963, p. 4.
- Young, James Dean. "The Enigma Variations of Thomas Pynchon." Critique, 10, No. 1 (1967), 69-77.